The nude censored

As the September issue of Image was readied for publication last June our printer refused to print some of the photographs of nudes by George Krause. The photographs were illustrating an article by Krause about nude photography. Three of the photographs were acceptable to the printer as "art." Two were not. "I have employees who will refuse to handle these," he said. "I have learned that it is not worth it to me to fight this kind of issue with them." The compromise solution we attempted to adopt with the printer became unworkable when yet another photograph of a nude by another photographer was later rejected. It was part of an illustration for an article on photographers in New Mexico.

Two more printers turned us down because of the nudes. As I viewed displays commemorating Freedom of the Press in their offices, the idea took on new meaning. Freedom of the Press, it seems, depends on who controls the press. On the fourth try we found a printer whose background, visual awareness and understanding of what our publication is about allows him to print Image without first passing judgement. Of the four printers who actually saw the photos, three rejected them because of their content. None of the rejecting printers asked about the context in which the photos would be seen. None read the text by George Krause explaining his views on nude photography.

Upon publication we discovered the issue of the nudes was not finished. We learned that some of our readers were disgusted by the nude photos and threw the magazine away after a quick glance. Others thought the kind of nude photography we pictured was outdated. While we didn't set out to be controversial, it seems as though we were. We intended to show what a variety of photographers are doing and to provide a forum for discussion and viewing of their work.

The human figure is a universal art theme. In the same issue were also photos of nuns, a mother and two daughters, Irish school children, and Tibetan nomads to name a few.

We are curious about what is going on in photography and seek to be as well-rounded and comprehensive as possible within our 24 pages published quarterly. Besides the article on nude photography, for example we covered European photography, dogs, a Houston photo project, Houston's three juried photography shows as well as book reviews. We publish a library of material that will broaden their understanding about photography.
The spirit of nature

Lynn Trafton talks with John Wimberley about his inspiration


I listen for photographs, I listen for sounds," says John Wimberley, California photographer. With a growing reputation that is progressing ever eastward, Wimberley's ability to share rare glimpses of nature has become a personal expression of his relationship with life.

As Wimberley continues, it is evident that much more than technical data goes into the making of his images. His approach to photography begins to come into view: a view he willingly shares.

Even after 18 years in photography, Wimberley's first experience with a camera on the flight deck of a carrier in the Viet Nam war is important to him. He became drawn to the action and relationships on deck. The fact that he had never photographed before was not important, but the need to record these images was. It was against regulations to photograph on deck, so he just stenciled PHOTO on the back of his jacket, set up a movie camera and went to work. It looked official, and he was able to finish his 30 minute film. It was later stolen, unfortunately, but served to start Wimberley's special relationship with the world through the viewfinder.

"I treat the places I photograph as my friends," says Wimberley. When he first started, he used to drive around with no particular photograph in mind, but more and more he found himself returning to many of the same areas. He began to feel a personal friendship developing between himself and those places. "The photographs became statements on my relationship with that special point," recalls Wimberley. "Just as in a human friendship you begin to reveal more of yourself each time you meet, so is it in nature. Every time I go, a little more is revealed and we become closer friends."

To Wimberley, the ritual is photography: the equipment is the dance of contact. "If I am concentrating on looking for a photograph, my mind starts calculating what makes a good picture, and the essence of the moment is gone," says Wimberley. "I like the contact of my feet with the ground, which allows the forces in a place to pull me toward an image I will set up on film. It is important for my pictures to be a little ahead of me. When I look into the ground glass, there must be a sense of reaching."

"In a sense, I am striving to be able to show that in some form everything you work with is part of yourself. Photography is one way of making yourself focus on what is around you."

Wimberley is intrigued with pictures that show a glimpse of the edge of the world. He feels that edges are interfaces where powers of energy exist, and he searches for those edges. "I would like to continue to search out the sense of mystery. The world is a vastly larger particle than I am, but we are all a part of nature. We cause changes as well as natural elements. That is a responsibility that man must shoulder," he says.

At one point, Wimberley began to read author Carlos Castaneda's views on nature and man which provided a welcome affirmation to his own experiences. At least he was not the only one who felt this personal relationship between himself and nature. Someone else believed there was much more to things than the surface view.

"The challenge to me in photography," he says, "is to view the surface appearance and seek what else is there. I seek the spirit of the place. In some places the surface is as if the spirit is wrapped up in a rug. I try to look for surfaces wrapped in gossamer."


(John Wimberley is represented in Houston by Mancha Gallery and has conducted a large format camera workshop for HCP.)
A conversation with André Kertész by Esther de Vecsey

19 July, 1983 New York City. "Mr. Kertész?"
"Yes, yes. Je parle français?
"Brezhnev is marvellous!" (May I speak Hungarian?)
"Pazar, pazar! Te tudok? (Of course, certainly, go right ahead!) Thus began my first conversation by telephone with André Kertész. His voice had the clear ring of a once hearty wind-up phonograph. Resistant at first, he responded enthusiastically to my request to speak in our native tongue.

Hearing that I had to leave for Houston within two days, Kertész paused to explain that he had arrived from London the night before and needed time to settle in. We arranged to meet at his apartment the next day at 1 p.m.

"Things will be better-skelter on account of my luggage," he said... "and unfortunately the air conditioning broke during my absence. I hope it is repaired by tomorrow. Do you know how to find me?... Yes, that's the right address, just come to the lobby. The porter will bring you up to the thirteenth floor... I look forward to seeing you." Such cordiality from someone in Kertész's position surprised me. I assumed that like many famous people, he would check him self, screening out all but the most contractual contacts. But it seemed sufficient for him to receive me on short notice when I told him that I too was Hungarian, an ennegre, and that I lived in Houston, where I met him for the first time, and one-man exhibition at Petra Benteler's Gallery, I planned a small complementary show at the Blaffer Gallery of the University of Houston.

Approaching the stately deco apartment building on lower Fifth Avenue, I became aware of the awe in which I held Kertész. At 89 years of age he is recognized as one of the great innovators in the history of photography who continues to be remarkably active today. I reviewed what I knew of him, recalling his first U.S. exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964. He was several years at the time.

Most recently, I had read Bela Ugir's excellent article about Kertész, "Photography in Full Bloom" in the Houston Post, January 2, 1983. I keep the clipping in my copy of Hungarian Memories, the latest Kertész book published in 1982 by the New York Graphic Society. Wishing for me as the elevator opened was André Kertész, a bit smaller than I thought he would be, but in every other way surpassing my expectations and exuding a mature’esque presence. "Hogy van? Őrlik hogy idejére? "Sajnos hogy olyan feledkeztes van, most jöntem meg Londonból, s pone abelég héspeug hédéggé a légkert. (How are you? Glad you could come! Please excuse the bit of mess... and in this heat the air conditioning had to give out.)

There was no affection in the charm and hospitality of his welcome as he escorted me into his world.

We paused in the living room, lit by sunlight streaming from windows all around. Then I was ushered into Kertész’s "bed-sitting room", where the only functioning window unit cooled the air. Deliberately he observed the forced-in portion of the window, an unchaperoned woman in so intimate a setting. It jogged my memory to the persistent Victorian mores shared by Hungarians of my parent’s generation.

Over a glass of ice cold orange juice, I listened as Kertész told the story of his life in the United States. He expressed himself clearly and unadorned about his disillusionment, the pain of separation from Europe, struggles to make his living in a hostile climate, illness and other misfortunes that plagued him and Elizabeth, his deceased wife whom he still mourns deeply.

He sat behind a small 19th century desk piled high with correspondence and files. I sat in a comfortable period case armchair, captivated by his words and the wall behind him. Shelves covered the memo board. All sorts of books, objects, framed pictures and other items became agents in our conversation. Here were his brothers, athletic young men in Hungary. Rippl, Swimming, Underwater Swimmer, and the Franz were studies of their antics between 1913 and 1919.

His Mother’s Hands and numerous shots of Elizabeth spanning their 45 year marriage were pointed out to illustrate our dialogue.

"Reporting to his inquiry, I offered a brief description of what I do in Houston. ‘Oh, I remember Houston well,’ he said. ‘The people were so terribly nice. I went there when I was working as a commercial photographer. I remember so many of those people — especially the lady in the grand house who received me sitting with her seat back in a wicker chair.’ (With the help of Stephen Fox of Rice University, I located three photographs by Kertész in the Staub archives of the Metropolitan Research Center of the Houston Public Library. They are of the "modern house" built by John Staub for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Strass which, together with a number of distinguished Texas homes, was published in the March 1950 issue of Home and Garden in a feature entitled "Texas Big Darlin’.”)

From time to time, I looked out the span of glass to my right. This is the panorama of lower Manhattan recorded in many of Kertész’s well-known photographs, published and mentioned in many of the books of his work. Of New York (edited by Nicholas Depietro, published by Knopf, 1976) contains the views recorded between 1937 when Kertész arrived in New York and "New York", by André Kertész, the mid-1970s. Here are close-up cubic stacks of brick facades; far-off vistas of skyline; people caught unaware on distant rooftops, walking up and down the foliage of trees below.

On the window sill was the most fascinating array of photo-albums. Here were the familiar curios which are the elements of many of Kertész’s still life studies. I was astonished that so many of these miniature animals, birds, reptiles, and bugs were of glass. The play of sunlight on these objects scattered on the sill and the glass etagere against the window provided a continuing feast for the eyes. Kertész urged me to move the objects around, as he does, to create little dramas and scenarios as a foil to the real-life theater outside. "I will show you before you leave — how I have used these, but now, take that book," he said pointing to Hungarian Memories, "I will tell you what is behind the pictures..."

I was interested in the life of a young cosmopolitan stock-broker in Budapest in the early decades of the 20th century: his friends, brothers, sweethearts, models, business colleagues, secretaries, street scenes, country outings, and sports (especially swimming in the Danube, a river from Budapest.) All are recorded with the matter-of-fact candor and discriminating sensibility of this self-taught photographer. He talked about World War I, the cases of photographs he took on the front, and how these photographs were lost. He pointed to Dockyard, "You see, I made that at night. It was amazing for its time..." and later in Paris I showed Carrier-Bresson, and taught Halas Gyula (Bressa) who then turned around and... "So many people, so many photographs, so many memories...

Then the subject turned to Elizabethe, to the days of their courtship, their outings together, her character. "She was typical jeune fille de bonne famille. She was just a child really. Here she is with her eel, and here she sits in her tweed suit and walking shoes, putting because adownpour had ruined our trip to the country. Here we visited my friend outside Budapest. The house had an inner court, and I caught the scene partially reflected in the mirror of an arm, I told her to stand just here, you see how it turned out!"

Time had passed and the western sun was glinting on the horizon, piercing the sides of all the relevant creatures on the window sill.

The last and most moving part of my visit was theNON-SCENE. I want to show you my latest photographs. I am doing Polaroids and I’m very satisfied with the results.

He gave me a little book, From My Window, published in 1981. It is a touching memorial to his wife. The frontispiece, a picture within a picture, shows the 1931 Portrait of Elizabeth obligingly set on the neutral ground. The image itself is arresting, showing only the left side of her face, neck and shoulder which is clamped by his hand. In the Polaroid another element has been added; a perfectly turned, spiky crown of thorns placed so it encircles his wife’s profile, making her look like Calvary. I cannot think of a more eloquent symbol of the pain of the love that broke her heart. This sensa- tion was pervasive, as he took me into the living room pointing to where her piano had been; and in her room, now a library. On a little table was the glass bust used in many of his still-life compositions. He had seen the object some years before in Breton’s famous window and was struck by how the facetless silhouette with its inclined head resembled Eliza- bethe’s characteristic gesture. He resisted and resisted, but finally broke down and bought it.

These fantasies of the past are not Kertész’s only concern today. His recent London trip was to receive special academic honors, adding to his collection of distinctions, merits, orders and decorations. He delights in the photographs of the ceremonies that show the professor and students. He is also busy cataloguing his review his work. "So much to do..." he said looking at the open, unpacked suitcase on the sofa in the living room. It is one of the last things so vivid in my memory of the long afternoon spent conversing with André Kertész.
Above: "Distortion # 68", 1933, by André Kertész.

Photos by André Kertész opposite page,
top: "Underwater Swimmer", Eekergom, 1917;
middle left: "Marianne", 1932;
bottom left: "Distortion with Self portrait", 1933;
NEW WALLS

Ron Martin views the work of three photographers at HCP’s new gallery

During his initial work in photojournalism, Jim Caldwell says that he likened his basic premise to that of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal, which states, in part, that as the scale of the area observed is reduced, our effects on it, and therefore our uncertainty about it, is increased; i.e., as we become more intimate, we become more unsure of what we know. Similarly, as the size of the group Jim photographed decreased, his influence, for better or worse, increased. At one-to-one, the effect was profound; so much so that he began to doubt the credibility of the portrait as it is commonly regarded.

At the same time as he sought an alternative to the portrait process, he became increasingly aware of his debt to his models in other projects. A great model was a true collaborator and had ideas of his or her own to contribute. Hence, he began, over a year ago, to lend his studio to interested persons for self-portraits. The basic modus operandi has been to set a motor-driven camera on a tripod in front of a large, full-length mirror facing seamless backdrop paper. He then set lights on the participants according to their wishes, coached them on a few technical do’s and don’ts, handed them the long cable release and left. The results have been surprising and the participants usually thrilled.

Jim Tiebout’s photographs deal with common objects that are usually seen in a different context. He has tried to give them new life by viewing them from a different perspective and making them surpass their normality. These objects lose their visual impact due to our constant exposure to them. He has tried to bring them to the foreground again by viewing them at different times and under different lighting conditions, thus allowing the form to transcend the mundane quality that we have attributed to them.

Claire Peeps, a California photographer sees the human figure as appealing to universal sympathies with sexuality and self-affirmation. She prefers not to dwell on the obvious in her images in order to illustrate stories. She chooses instead to situate the figures in sparse, distilled environments where they can be freed of spatial and literal context. While she acknowledges that there may be some latent eroticism in her pictures, she seeks to encase it with a broader framework of generalized sensuality rather than specified sexuality. Just as she tries to impart a sense of physical distance, she tries to create an illusion of audible distance too. By the use of so much white and grey it is as if the figures are caught between silence and intermittent noises and between stasis and movement.
and now . . . from Austin

First in a series on photography in Texas, by Sharon Stewart

"Graze," 1982, by Keith Dannenmiller
"Newberry Commerce", by Judy Allen.

"Dallas", by Robin Sachs.

"Untitled", by Ave Bonar.

"Untitled", by Ellen Wallenstein.
Book of Days:
Allen, Dannemiller, Earley, Greenberg, Sachs, Schleif.

* Photowork Gallery:
Bonan, Church, Culwell, Dannemiller, Edwards, Rowe.

Accent Gallery:
Blakemore, Wallenstein.

Seana Church.
The end of the romance
Elizabeth Glassman interviews John Starkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg on the work of Atget

JOHN Starkowski is the director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art and Maria Morris Hambourg is a photographic historian. They are co-authors of "The Work of Atget," four volumes published by The Museum of Modern Art to accompany the four exhibitions focused on the work of Eugene Atget. The third exhibition in that series, The Ancien Regime, opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on October 13, and will run through December 18. The Museum of Modern Art's Atget collection includes 5,000 prints and 1,000 negatives purchased from Berenice Abbott who purchased them from the photographer's estate in 1932.

The following interview by photographic historian Elizabeth Glassman is the result of separate conversations, in Houston, with Starkowski and Hambourg.

EG: "Maria, when did you become interested in the work of Atget?"
MMH: I had written about Atget as an undergraduate at Wellesley and when I arrived at the Museum of Modern Art as an intern under John in the Department of Photography, I was still fascinated. During the year as an intern, I studied the Museum of Modern Art's Atget collection at night. This was not my job. It was just on my own. Five thousand photographs, a lot of table space, a year and a passion.

As things were building up to the surface, I proposed to write my dissertation for Columbia on one particular series of Atget's work that does not exist at the museum. I thought that by working on this series, which I assumed I would find in Paris, I would be able to tell a little more about the Museum of Modern Art collection. John was extremely enthusiastic and supportive.

When I returned to New York from Paris, John and I decided to co-author a book on the work of Atget. The number of volumes at that time was determined. Then began a long and basically reductive process of going through the work on a picture-by-picture basis, deciding which pictures were worthy as documents and which were more exceptional, those that transformed the documentary impulse into a lasting statement beyond the simple record of the object. When we realized that there was more than three times more than we could publish, we had to go back to the drawing board. In a real communal effort, we were finally able to knead the material into four volumes. These follow approximately the same division of subject matter that Atget himself had devised: the first - old France - the most basic, which is to say the land itself, the support of this traditional civilization which was France; second, the urban civilization which crowned that, the art of old Paris; third, the Ancien Regime. This was John's idea. He understood the pictures in an historical sense, that Atget was recording something that was on its last leg. The perception was very definitely a romantic, or nostalgic one.

The fourth volume was the hardest. Atget had already figured this series out and we stuck fairly closely to his parameters. Atget called it "pictoresque Paris," but the word "pictoresque" has changed so drastically, that we hardly use it any more. In thinking about what photographs of Paris of Atget's day announce to us in a two-word phrase, the Charlie Chaplin movie "Modern Times" came to mind. The subject is that moment of transformation of the traditional society of horse-drawn cars into a modern metropolis with subways, and how the values of people were effected as they made that transition.

EG: "John, in an essay entitled "Photographing Architecture," (Art in America, Summer 1959), you said the following: "Photography will express more than a polite and circumscribed interest in a building's superficial form. It will, in its own language, suggest the imperatives of human need underlying that form and explore the personal and social act of creative building. Photography assumes that subject matter because it lies in the world of human values, where the camera is most at home." Then in 1972, for an exhibition titled Atget's Trees, you wrote a study of his repeated investigation of the same or similar subjects, on the other hand, suggests a conscious and sophisticated concern with the ultimately formal problems of picture making." On one hand exists the idea of the camera in the world of human values and on the other the emphasis on the formal problems of picture making. How do these two ideas relate to your thinking about Atget now?"
JS: I think I still believe in both. When I say formal problems of picture making I mean straight lines or triangles, triangles or shallow space, the problem of how one uses photography to describe an idea. The idea modifies one's sense of how you can use the machine and the machine modifies one's sense of what other possible ideas are consummate with the mechanical capacities. Then learn how those potentials can be related to and express human values and the whole business of human investigation. It seems to me that is what formal problems are. What is the difference between being a person of good heart or good intentions or pure soul and being an artist. I mean one doesn't follow the other. Being a concerned citizen doesn't make one an artist or politician or any other effective instrument. One must learn the formal potentials of politics. This is a difficult question for me because I once thought I knew the difference between the form and the content of a work of art, but long ago I forgot and now I can't tell the difference any more. In reference to the question you asked, I don't think there was ever the thought that the work was more uniquely rooted in a concern for the human significance of the subject matter, the raw material, than for Atget. This was not separate from his sense of the potentials of what photography could do, especially not when he got involved in another field, another, better, and better. You can no longer - you simply can't - make a distinction between his mind and his eye.

EG: "Atget began his career as an actor. He began to photograph at about age 35. In her essay, 'The Structure of the Work,' Maria discusses our modern perception of the work: "Atget understood art to be skill, the capacity to raise work to the highest standards of excellence. It was not an autonomous, self-consumptive activity. One plied his art in the service of a calling. This notion was essential both to his formation as an actor and to his work in a utilitarian branch of photography." Maria, would you comment further on this?"
MMH: I think I have said what I wanted to say pretty simply. And I must say simply. It seems to me that if we assume that Atget is a modern artist the way we would assume that Matisse for example, is a great modern artist, they were of approximately the same period then we take the same standards that we apply to Matisse and we apply them to Atget. We judge him from his smallest doddles to his largest most marvelous paintings as products of the pace and illusion and visual education and ideas of this man.

In Atget's case, it doesn't work that way, because the man was a commercial photographer, he was an artisan, a craftsman in an old world sense. Many photographers are misunderstood, which is that you fill a job and perform a service. It is similar to the architect: you have to build something that will stand up and be serviceable. And there's the budget and the client. But most of the time in the last ten years that I have been worrying about photography, people come in expecting that everything is going to be of the highest order or that it is going to be art or interesting, but that is not the case. It is just not. In Atget's case, the man worked very hard and supported himself entirely from his craft.

There is a wariness that is just plain hard work, record making. One of the great things about photography is that it is a way of exploring the world. If you take on these projects, whatever they are, whether you have "photographs of a boat, you learn something about it. If you want to be a star all you are doing is making an empty statement. One of the things that ultimately make something wonderful with this time spent in hard work, is that when you finally get around to allowing yourself to say something, you say something. Atget knew where the values were and what they meant. He had been out there. It is a statement from the heart.

EG: "I believe this is an attitude we are too far away from. It seems that many understand the activity of the artist right now is in relation to being a star."
I wondered John, if you could comment on the current situation facing the young contemporary photographer.

JS: There isn’t any way to advise artists. One might hope different people with different prejudices, backgrounds, and readings of what is valuable would have different kinds of hopes and ambitions for the future of the medium. I hope that, for example, a body of work like this might help young photographers to view the possibilities of the medium, to see the seriousness and to envision in the long range what they might do or what it might be for. I would encourage them to approach the work with a generosity of spirit that we see in the work of Atget or Lee Friedlander for example. One might hope that this example might encourage people to think of photography as something less like juggling, less like acrobatics, and more like study. That doesn’t have anything to do with what the pictures are going to look like. I am not talking about style, technique, or formal prejudices. It is just about a sense of who one is as a photographer, and what kind of human ambitions that might entail. I know that is very vague, but nobody knows what it will look like.

EG: Can you comment on this image, Parc de Sceaux, in relationship to the question: “What have you learned from Atget?” You must have changed your visual acuity after looking for so long.

In addition, you speak of Atget as a benchmark for other photographers in Looking at Photographers, (Museum of Modern Art, 1973). What specifically should we learn from Atget?

JS: I don’t know, what do you know so far? It is not like a doctor’s prescription, you take a pill and you get better. The reason his work is so wonderful is that you can keep learning new things from it or at least it can remain interesting and vital. I don’t understand his pictures. I think Parc de Sceaux is one of the most astonishing photographs ever made. I mean imagine making that photograph. What the hell, what kind of idiot did he have in his head that made him decide. “Yes, that’s a photograph,” or “Yes, that’s a subject.” You know, or at least think, that he wasn’t working like some kind of synthetic cubist, just some thinking of interesting ways to divide the space. It had to do with more than that or something else than that. But what a way to divide the space, what a way to define what a subject is, what a place to put the edges — both in terms of the central physical design of the picture and also in terms of definition of the content of the picture. Where a place to stand. I think he made 66 pictures at Sceaux. This was the last number. They had just decided to turn the garden into some kind of public, municipal park. They came and started sweeping up, cleaning up the place. As dissimilar as they seem in many ways, Atget and Stieglitz knew some of the same things, and had some of the same intuitions. They learned as they photographed. They both look back and back and back to the same motifs, because they knew they weren’t the same subject. Stieglitz photographed Georgia O’Keeffe every day of her life, but it wasn’t the same subject. It is always something new, always something different. Different potentials — what you may call a motif, it’s endless: The dying poplars, the clouds, the view from the window of the Shelton. Both learned that, practiced it in a rich and sophisticated way, I think that maybe Atget understood it even in a richer, more intuitive way, but that is not important.

I don’t mean that meaning is necessarily sequential or it necessarily increases on the basis of an additional photograph. To make this picture, this marvelous you don’t need the rest of the Sceaux pictures. I simply suggest that one understand the almost absolute plasticity of the possible meanings of the visual world.

MMH: Parc de Sceaux is a picture of the park itself. It was taken in June of 1925. It shows a stairway which Atget photographed previously in March of 1924 and there is grass all over it. This is one of the last pictures that Atget took in a series of Sceaux. The reason it is so interesting to me is that I once met a man who was the son of a man who lived in Sceaux. The father bought every postcard and picture of it that he could get. Well, this man met Atget working in the park, so he said “I want every picture you make.” So Atget said to himself, “Fine, I have another client, let me finish this series.” And he took two notebooks of Sceaux pictures to this man. He bought them and the notebooks are complete. They are the only notebooks of the Sceaux series that I know of. In them the pictures start out at #10 and end at #75. The 10th picture is like this one but with all of the moss and lichens. This is the last picture. It shows the beginning of the clean-up of the park itself, which had been created for Colbert and had been in disrepair. The park passed from many hands and was in desolate shape when the state bought it in 1934. So Atget went in the earliest of the early spring mornings. There was barely enough light to photograph and he photographed the place just in time before it was spruced up and made into a park. I think that is very interesting. What would in fact be the first photograph for most people was for Atget the last. It was the end of the romance, the end of the poetry and the final word.
First fellows: three winners

Lynn Trafton writes about the HCP's first documentary awards, projects and photographers

THE Houston Center for Photography awarded its first three fellowships of $1000 each last spring to Naomi Bullock, Martin Harris and Pamela Morris for their individual, ongoing documentary projects in Houston, about Houston.

Shown at the HCP in October and November, their projects reflect different aspects of the city's social problems, environment and ever-changing population.

“I approached the portfolios and samples of work in progress with a completely open mind,” says Wendy Watriss, Houston-based photojournalist and writer who judged the entries. “I looked for different treatments of documentary ideas. Of great importance to me,” she recalls, “was the desire to include documentaries different than the classical forerunners Dorothea Lange and Jacob Riis. I found a high quality of work and imagination in the majority of submitted projects, but I hoped for more entries and more socially concerned work,” she says.

“Naomi Bullock’s images have something to say about the character of downtown Houston,” says Watriss.

“They swirl you into the chaotic movement, the facial expressions of its inhabitants, the interdynamics of traffic, people and buildings. Her color photographs use a conceptual approach to a particular place — Houston,” Bullock has studied with Peter Brown at Rice University and is enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Texas, Austin.

“I found Martin Harris’ approach quite individualistic,” Watriss says. “His particular use of color and large format gave a feeling of empathetic irony that is unusual in most of this kind of photographic work I see today. The pictures of his parent’s home documents a certain kind of middle class suburban life style.” His parents never appear in the photographs. The only clues to their personalities lie in the interiors of the rooms in which they live: rooms that reflect the state of transition most homes go through, bedrooms to sewing rooms, hobby rooms to guest rooms, rooms that contain the lives of a family. The personalities begin to show through their choice of building materials, furniture, and knickknacks used in different stages of life. Harris’ reason for starting this project was to reveal the influences of his past and to make a statement on humans and their habits. He is working toward a Masters degree in photography at the University of Texas, Austin.

“I found Pamela Morris’ photographs of hospice care were emotionally strong and intimate about a subject that is difficult to photograph: the dying and death of someone who is not part of one’s own family. I feel that some of these images are among the strongest I have seen on this subject. I wanted her to have the opportunity and the impetus to continue this work. In addition to the quality of the images themselves, my choice of Morris’ photographs was influenced by my desire to include traditional black and white documentary work in this selection of fellowships.”

In April 1984 the HCP will again award three $1000 fellowships for ongoing work. Call or write the HCP for details.
The subject is filters

Lars Giercz, our technical advisor, tells when and how to use them.

23W. It isn't cheap ($15), but then how much would you pay to have gotten a good exposure of that landscape you blot out your last photo trip? I have found there are portions among us that scoff at the use of filters in black and white photography. But if the modern photographer, that left to its own decision, modern film will render blue subjects one tone too light, and greens as much as two tones too dark. Oh, now that we know what the film would give us if we didn't correct for its idiosyncrasies, what do we do? Well, of course, we fool the film in exactly the way we perceive what the "right" tones of gray. Note that there is a "per- fect" filter that can be used. Sometimes the sky should be white, and sometimes a slight darkening might capture your feeling of the subject. Similarly, most colors will fit each of the colors a different way. After reviewing the scene you are about to photograph with the viewing filter, select the appropriate filter from the chart.

3. Background: Darkroom can be very hazardous to your health. But there are things you can do to stay out of trouble.

Dangers: Radiation exposure is a constant problem. Exposure by 

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From China
Lynn Trahan talks with Wu Dahzen

When Wu Dahzen arrived in Houston, among his belongings were a clarinet and boxes of his photographs of China. Here from China by way of a music scholarship from Arizona University in Tucson, Dahzen is studying for a Performance Master degree at Rice University. His photographs were the subject of an HCP exhibit in September.

"I have been studying music for many years as a profession, and have played with the Peking Ballet Symphony for eight years. My photography though, started as a hobby during the cultural revolution in China," he says.

As a student Dahzen was inspired by pictures of Chinese landscapes and wanted to capture his own vision of that country. "About that time, I met a professional, Chen Chiu Chan, who urged me to buy a $3 developing tank, borrow an old camera from friends and get started on my own landscapes. I taught myself how to develop and print in a darkroom at the Music Conservatory," he recalls.

"This happened when all the schools were closed so that the students could take part in the cultural revolution. I decided to take pictures instead. So, I traveled all over China with my camera. "In those days you could not have two jobs," he says, "but times have changed. Now I can go home and work in both music and photography. My music used to support my hobby, but now photography is helping to support my music." Wu is supplementing his income here by photographing a catalog for a local jewelry company. Besides the HCP exhibit he has also shown at Manchester Cafe, where he blended his talents by playing Chinese folk songs at his opening.

His soft pastel landscapes are places to dream of, where Chinese folk tales could come to life. Mountains stand amidst fog and rain taunting the viewer's belief in reality. His black and white images of people show the movement of everyday life in the rising dust of crowds, the press of ticket buyers, the group of waiting room occupants and the marketplace in full swing. Individual studies show quieter moments in a crowded, busy country so different from our own.

"From China to the United States is a long way in miles and in culture," he observes. "I still feel that everything in the United States goes too fast," says Dahzen, "and it has been hard to get used to. There seems to be no time to reflect and to think. Suddenly, I had to be very independent. It was a hard thing to do," he says.

While Dahzen takes his opportunity to study abroad, his wife remains in China as a ballerina with the Peking Ballet Company. She may visit here soon. In the meantime "I am learning to use some of both cultures," he says. "I am beginning to update my camera collection. Since I like street photography, I carry my camera everywhere. When I go back to China, I will have images of the United States to share with my countrymen."
ROY Stryker: U.S.A., 1934-1950
The Standard Oil (New Jersey) Photography Project,
by Steven W. Platek.
University of Texas Press, Austin, 1983.

OUT of The Forties,
by Nicholas Lemann.

EVERY photograph is a memory,
perhaps not a personal memory,
but at least a suggestion of the past.
When we look at a photograph, we assume that we are seeing what the photographer saw and what we would have seen if we had been there. This faith in the camera is the strength of documentary photography.

The photograph above is from Out of the Forties, and was taken by Esther Bubley in Tenebrell, Texas. My first response is to a particular time, based on clothes, furniture, wallpaper; certain visual clues add up, to place this picture in the appropriate decade. Since I was born in 1948, I am not remembering it from my childhood, but am comparing it with other pictures I have seen, and to movies based on similar photographs.

In the same way that those movies use props to describe the time frame, Bubley used props to create her dream. My acceptance of the documentary mode is so habitual that I didn't question the methodology until I noticed the quality of light. The bare light bulb over the table is not on, and the strong sidelighting comes from somewhere outside the picture edge. We are looking at a directed piece, lighted for a stage; a domestic tragedy in one act.

If this image is not a memory from my family, it is still a strong memory, a collective memory, and as such is a symbol for a particular time, both historically and personally. The perceived tranquility resides in the position of the figures, their activities, the quality of light, the idyllic circumstance of an only child, the certainty of roles assigned according to sex, and the security of knowledge represented by the Encyclopedia Britannica. Beneath this domesticated scene that appears to be an intimate view inside a typical home is an elaborately constructed piece of propaganda. The concept of family, culturally formed by all of our operating myths, has been given specificity. But the ideological nature of the image is concealed by its apparent naturalness. We accept it "truth" without questioning the conditions of the life on stage. (The reader is referred to "The Currency of the Photograph" by John Tagg. Thinking Photography, published by The MacMillan Press, London, for a thoughtful analysis of this topic.)

It is important to know that this image was made for the Standard Oil Company in an effort to alter their public image following charges of collaborating with a German company during World War II. It and the others in these two books were made to appear in newspapers and magazines as examples of the "little people" who made up the world's largest corporation. They were made for reproduction, and good lighting was as necessary as quotes and names. Posing was not seen as dishonest. In order to show that the Standard Oil Company existed on a human as well as corporate scale, everyday activities were pictured. The pictures show typical things that people did, not the unusual or extraordinary. They contribute to our nostalgia for a simpler time of clarity and normalcy and convince us that life was as orderly as the pictures.

ROY Stryker: U.S.A., 1934-1950
is what we have come to expect of photography books — coated stock, one or two pictures to a page, minimal captions. It is a catalogue for an exhibition organized by the International Center for Photography, has a detailed history of the project, and is organized around the individual photographers. It treats the photographs as unique, crafted images and reproduces them very well. Each image is left to stand alone, with little concern for the original context. A checklist includes negative numbers and directions for ordering prints from the Photographic Archives, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky.

Out of the Forties is more in the tradition of how the pictures originally were intended to be used. Nicholas Lemann has taken photographs from the same collection (in several instances the same image) and has made a completely different book. It is organized around five small towns that were photographed by the project photographers.

Lemann returned to each town, looking for the people in the pictures and for their stories. They talk about the time we see pictured, and the changes that have occurred in their lives. We are reminded that the knowledge received from a photograph is limited and that a shift of context will alter our understanding of it.

The checklist in Roy Stryker is careful to mark those images that "were cropped differently from the photographer's original wishes due to technical flaws in the negatives." Out of the Forties, on the other hand, doesn't hesitate to crop an image to fit a particular format or idea. On page 24 of Out of the Forties a small 2 1/2-inch x 4-inch picture of "Thomass Jefferson Robinson, the self-proclaimed 'cat skinner from Elk Basin, and his daughter Sally Jane sing a country song at an amateur night, Powell, Wyoming, 1944." The figures are closely cropped, with little of the surrounding space included in the image. Page 32 of Roy Stryker shows the same people in a 7 1/4-inch square picture standing in front of a water-stained wall decorated with hearts and the initials of lovers, captioned "Amateur radio night Wyoming, 1944." The size and the bravado of that young girl is altered significantly by the inclusion of her surroundings.

This is just one example of how cropping, caption, and context modify the original images. One book tells the story of the photographers, the other tells the story of the people in the pictures. Neither one tells "the complete story." They compliment each other in wonderful ways. In the space of their differences, we manage to slip beyond our blind faith in documentary photography as "truth" and see them for the symbols that they are.

As Stryker said about the Farm Security Administration photographs of the previous decade, "... all this re-mind me of the town where I lived up north. I would look at pictures like that and long for a time when the world was safer and more peaceful." Paul Hester Photographs from Out of the Forties, including 10-dye transfer color prints, will be on exhibition in Sewall Gallery, Rice University, January 27-March 10, 1984.

Here are three works about journeys: one, a physical journey through the depression and across a continent, a second, more personal the change in attitude the photographer undergoes in two decades of work, and third, a journey of time and perspective through the landscape of an artist's upbringing.


The recently published Dorothea Lange: Photographs of a Lifetime (1982) is hardly the first retrospective on that photographer. Among the several works that have covered her career are Milton Meltzer's Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life (1978) and Karin Becker Ohren's Dorothea Lange and the Documentary Tradition (1980). This

REVIEWED
Paul Hester and Teresa Byrne-Dodge review new books about photographic memories and journeys

From "Out of the Forties". Photo by Esther Bubley.
striking collection, which boasts splendid black and white reproduction, is reproduced courtesy of the Oakland (Calif.) Museum. It's detailed effort and includes a chronology, bibliography and source notes.

Robert Cole's introduction traces Lange's life, beginning with her childhood in New Jersey where 7-year-old Dorothea contracted polio. A resultant limp stayed with her to the end of her life. Almost 60 years later, she commented on being "half-crippled": "It was perhaps the most important thing that happened to me. (It) formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once. I've never gotten over it and I am aware of the force and power of it."

In fact, Lange's vibrating moral passion may well have been engendered by her own physical handicap, as well as by an early exposure to the ghetto squatter of Manhattan's Lower East Side, an area where her mother worked as a librarian and Lange attended school. Her association with the Farm Security Administration, a government agency charged with helping impoverished farmers during the Great Depression, was largely accidental; in fact, she was originally designated a "typist" for her husband, economist Paul Taylor. Her subsequent career with the FSA and her relationship with Roy Stryker were both characterized by heated debates and letters. Yet despite these initial difficulties, her work ranks among the masterworks of modern photography.

Willard Van Dyke wrote of Lange in 1943 in Camera Craft: "She sees the final criticism of her work in the reaction to it of some person who might view it fifty years from now. It is her hope that such a person would see in her work a record of the people of her time..." Obviously Lange has passed her self-imposed test of time. Half a century later, her inextinguishable madonna-portrait, "Migrant Mother," still flows with the juice of human life.

Later in life, Lange traveled abroad to photograph in Korea, Ireland, Egypt and Nepal. The photographs from the final decade of her life are sweetly personal and often include her family and Berkeley home. Teresa Byrne-Dodge

PICTURES FROM The New World. Photographs and text by Danny Lyon. Aperture, $17.95 softcover.

LIKE Lange, Danny Lyon also has traveled extensively as revealed in his two-year-old autobiography, Pictures from the New World, now in paperback. Also like Lange, he moves beyond the stage as artist-observer to become a committed participant. At one time, for example, he was a staff photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the south. His portraiture is characterized by images candidly snatchted while crossing the line separating himself and the otherness of his subject matter.

His best known photographs are those of the dispossessed: motorcycle gang members, Colombian prostitutes and streeturchins, and Texas convicts. Lyon also has a reputation as a filmmaker (Clandestine, Little Boy), and he was the subject of a recent exhibition/screening at Rice's Media Center. Most of the photographs included here are black and white; the handful of color prints are hued in rich pastels. Observers like to compare Lyon's stream-of-consciousness roamings to the work of Jack Kerouac. The frames are full, pulsing, but the viewer must assess the distortions. While the photographs are stinging, Lyon is often strangely off-hand in his text.

Perhaps it's a factor of burnout. Who could maintain this kind of fury? Lyon's subject matter has changed since the publication of this book. His most recent work reflects a rapprochement with the middle class. Like Lange, Lyon seems to have discovered satis- faction in photographing his family, even as he has steadily developed confidence in his own powers of observation.

T. B. D.


WILLIAM Christenberry's journey is one of time and perception rather than geography or social viewpoint. His lyrically poetic Southern Photographs (1983) was some 20 years in the making. No trans-continental records for Christenberry; he has confined his subject to the environs of his family homestead in Hale County, Alabama. Christenberry works in a wide range of media, but his reputation rests primarily on his color photographs, with their satisfying tension and polite distance. For more than 15 years Christen- Berry used a simple Brownie box camera to record his scenes, until Lee Friedlander and publisher Caldecott Chubb convinced him to try a large-format Deardorf in 1977.

Unlike Lange's and Lyon's work, there are few humans to populate Christenberry's photographs. Often the photographer seems alone on a ghostly trail of never-seen people: sale dresses hanging in a window, graves, dilapi- dated shacks, weather-beaten signs, Kool vines draped saggingly across other vegetation, like span-glass angel hair on a Christmas tree, is another favorite subject.

"Today Christenberry is one of a handful of artists devoted to Southern themes. Although this book is full of intensely colored photographs, drenched in daylight, much of Christenberry's other media reflects a darker side, including an abhorrence of and fascination with the Ku Klux Klan."

T. B. D.

Received


"For twenty years, Paul Kwilecki has worked with a quiet intelligence to photograph his home county in southwestern Georgia. His remarkable work portrays life in a small county as if it were-often intimately sometimes satirically, but always with understanding."


An "attractive book that consistently maintains just the right tone, both verbally and pictorially, that will suit it to the widest audience (and one that will help the beginner gain quite a systematic understanding of the process of photography.) From Exposure, the Journal of the Society of Photographic Education.

HALF A Truth Is Better Than None. Some Unsympathetic Conjectures about the Disorder of Human Experience, by John A. Kouwenhoven. The University of Chicago Press. $17.95, hardcover.

"Kouwenhoven compares the Eiffel Tower and the Ferris Wheel to show that the vernacular developed more unthinkingly in America than in Europe; discusses in a Snap- shot World and Photographs as Vernacular, (Historical Document) considers photography, "the most important visual art of the world," whose roots are wholly in the vernacular." From the (dustjacket).


Claude Monet lived and worked for forty years in the beautiful eight-acre garden of Giverny. The gardens that evolved from his designs enlarged the already grand painter. In the light and open air, through every seasonal moment, Monet's reverie embraced the iris and waterlilies, the water lilies and wild fields of his cultivation. Steven Shore was commissioned to document their restoration. These photographs express both the authentic revival of the gardens and the explorations of the photographer.

CHARLES Pratt. Photographs. Aperture. $25.00, paper.

"I have never seen anybody photographing Nature in the same way..." says Charles Pratt. His photographs have a photographic of trees and grasses and rocks have the purity of the child's vision that has not yet been corrupted or made unconfident by the adult world that is false and sterile..." Lisette Model.

ADVENTURES IN Close-up Photography: Rediscovering Familiar Environments through Details, By Lief Erickson. Illus. McGraw-Hill Book Co., N.Y. $32.50 hardcover. "You'll find a wide range of lighting and composition techniques that will help you take better close-ups with whatever equipment you like to work with best." (Press release).

PHOTOGRAPHERS Photographed, by Bill Jay with an introduction by Helmut Gern- scheer. Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City. 1983. $14.95 softcover. "Word and picture snapshots of over 80 photographers from the world of photography. From Larigonde and Bravo to Newhall and Sawyers... Bill Jay has captured them all in their diamond-like conversational moments. Each photo has its expanded caption and illumination... Each is shown affection and respect." (From the cover).

APPROACHING Photography, by Paul Hill, with a foreword by Aaron Scharf. Focal Press, London & Boston, 1983. $45.00 hardcover.

"In all about photographs... their hidden meanings and the effects they have on people; what the photographer is attempting to portray and what makes us wish to con-vey. Photographs can be an instrument for effecting change in social conditions or can be used to instill an opinion to per- suade people that things are not what they seem to be... Paul Hill has a wide range of pictures taken by some of the world's finest photographers and discusses how to understand what the photograph is really about." (From the dustjacket).

THE Print: The New Ansel Adams Photography Series/Book 3, by Ansel Adams with the collaboration of Robert M. Caplin, Brian Grose, Robert D. Duff, Chicago, 1983 A New York Graphic Society Book. $19.95 Hardcover. "The technical information is clear and concise, starting with basics — designing and furnishing the darkroom and making the first print — and proceeding to the most advanced methods for achieving a fine print, such as the development of toning, toning and bleaching, and subtle burning and dodging." (From the dustjacket).

BILL Brandt: Portraits. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1982. $37.50 hardcover. "This definitive collection of half a century's work will provide illumination, instruction and a deal of pleasure to everyone willing to see as well as to look." (From the dustjacket).

THE Keepers Of Light: A History and Working Guide to Early Photographic Processes by William E. Kendrick & Morgan, Dobbs Ferry, New York, 1979. $23.00 hardcover. "It is the most completely practical How-To Source for photographers and printmakers who want to explore and develop their creativity by using the processes between the early masters used." (From the cover).

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