RICHARD MISRACH IN THE DESERT
PARKER, PURCELL, AND POLAROID
PHOTOGRAPHS AS PROPERTY
SURREALISM AND AppropriATION
FRAMPTON, NICOSIA, BROWN, ET AL
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That language will change as is sure as the synery of the universe as it rolls relentlessly out to oblivion. That it would change as fast as it has around this magazine and the Houston Center for Photography in the last few weeks was unexpected, on the other hand. Natural phenomena are not always recognized as they occur, but I think this time we are alert to the moment, in which we are engaged in a new collaboration with Lew Thomas. Left, as we were, in the lunch by Lynn McNamara (now Herbert), our previous and only prior Executive Director, who suddenly moved to Chicago after telling us weekly for more than five months that she intended to do so, we were required to persuade someone else to come do what she did before she or she found out just exactly what needed to be done. Now we have engaged a new Executive Director, Lew Thomas, who has cast his net wide for many years, and presumably will try to pull it in from here.

Lew says things like “If you could get them to lift the screen through which they see the world…” He speaks of “strategy,” “issues,” and “ideas.” He speaks with some authority, much of which is already being discussed and practiced in post-modernist photography was nurtured by his ideas, acts, words, and images during the last 12 or 13 years. He has published many books, some with titles like Photography and Language or Structural(s) and Photography. He appears to be well respected among the most thoughtful critics and photographic innovators.

This may be one of those defining coincidences of person and institution that produces real change. The “Mission Statement” of the Houston Center for Photography contains a reference to our commitment “to provide a forum for critical dialogue and to encourage diverse approaches to photography.” Thus this magazine, the HCP’s exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and fellowships, not to mention all the wonderful meetings. For Lew, who has already used publishing, photography, curating, teaching, bookstalling, and God only knows what else in his endeavors, the HCP is a new basket of tools, some of which he hasn’t used before and some of which he is already expert at.

Considering that Foto Fest is right around the corner (again, see page 4) and that hordes of people will arrive from all over the world to participate in America’s first real international photographic exposition, and that Lew has it in his head to create a new kind of photo center, the flavor of things will no doubt change around here.

What all this means is that by next summer or so, Houston will be the photographic center of the universe, which is fitting for a city named after the first human word spoken from the surface of the moon.

Every now and then you have to say things like that. At least, I do. Since I began editing this magazine eight issues ago, I have said things like that six times. Each time, I have regretted it. They have been fairly stupid, cute things, and twice I have made the same person angry saying them. I’m sorry for that.

Moments like this come. In this one, the editor is writing one of those so-long-it’s-been-good-to-know-yo-but-gotta-keep-movin-along-didn’t-intend-the-second-meaning-in-Welcome’s-(Levents). For these two years, I have whenever possible disobeyed Strunk & White’s Rule 9: Do not affect a breezy manner. This was largely at the urging of the aforementioned Lynn McNamara (Herbert), who apparently thought it was amusing. So was I. It was like that around here during those ah, formative years. There was a great sense of purpose and a great sense of humor. It was fun. It was also dozy, of course, as everyone who has endured one or more of these high-energy start-ups knows well.

Now it goes into its third or fourth phase, in which the institution seems assured and the questions of meaning and stance predominate. It is a moving vehicle in search of position. Lew Thomas is the driver. He is a madman at this, so it is time around here for seat belts, as he also becomes the editor of this magazine, which shall now be reborn, with new labels.

The magazine had actually entered the post-modernist era in a substantial way thanks to Sam Samor (whose current curatorial effort is reviewed by Paul Hester on page 10), who wrote extensively on his accomplishments in the summer 1985 issue, saying, among other equally outrageous things, that in 1974 the Samore Gallery had “successfully raised the issue of reproductions and originality by appropriating the whole of modernist photography (Zarolkowksi is the high priest of modernist photography and looking at windows serves as the apotheosis of his theories), and worked in the post-modernist era.” It was then eleven years before Andy Grundberg announced the crisis of post-modernism (for a short discussion of his position see SPOT, spring 1985, page 5). Now it remains to be seen whether post-modernism also means post-humaneism and a bitter end to romance, all of it played out right here on these pages.

The purpose of all these seemingly endless references to this fine magazine is to meet the Reader’s attention to the idea that within these pages one has found, and will continue to find, writers and editors devoted to The Great Unscrambling. Thence forward into the age of Lew, who is now on the spot. (He said, as a way of leaving behind yet another of those cute digressions.)

Dave Crosby

MESSAGES

CERTAIN CHANGES

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WINTER 1985

SPOT

3
LEW THOMAS:
NEW HCP DIRECTOR

The new Executive Director of the Houston Center for Photography is Lew Thomas, photographer, curator, and author. Thomas will also become the editor of this magazine with the spring issue, which is published in March.


Although known as a conceptual photographer for his continued ex- amination of principles underlying the photographic image, Thomas has also curated important exhibitions, including ones on Imogen Cunningham for the San Francisco Art Institute, and a large study of structuralism for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Thomas replaces former Executive Director Lynn McLellan (Herbers), who resigned to move to Chicago this past fall. McLellan was the Center’s first director, who brought to the HCP more than 20 exhibitions and sharpened the organization during its formative years. A Lecture Fund was established in her honor and endowed the Center with $7,500 to date.

When Thomas has arrived at the Houston Center for Photography at an important time in its four-year history, noted Herman J. Dettering, President of the organization: “We have given great prominence to the importance of photography at an art form to a full-scale center, with a range of exhibitions, publications, lectures, workshops, and fellow- ship programs.” Thomas said, “It will bring us newly renewed energy and a broad na- tional outlook.”

VARIOUS NOTES
AND RUMORS
Two important European photographers—André Kertész and Herbert Bayer, who was 91, had enjoyed much cele- brity in the last years of his life. Decades ago, he was a successful art- ist in Europe, then moved to the United States in 1936, where he felt he was being ignored. He is now widely regarded as a true pioneer in documentary photography.

Bayer was a student at the original Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany, and taught at the Dessau Bauhaus. He was an associate of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and others. In 1938, he moved to the United States and became a successful graphic designer and architect.

The Art League of Houston and the Jewish Community Center will sponsor major photographic compe- titions to coincide with Foto Fest in the spring. The Art League competi- tion, juried by George Krause, is open to all Texas photographers, and the Jewish Community Center’s, juried by Van Deren Coke, is open to all photographers living in the U.S. Deadline for the Art League is February 3 for shipped work and February 5 for hand-delivered work.

The Art League also has a slide regis- try of Texas artists that will be available for review by art organizations, consultants, patrons, and the media. The registry is open to all Texas artists. For information, call the above number. The ART ALE, Art League of Houston, 1931 Montrose Blvd, Houston 77006.

Robert Frank will be in Houston February 28 to introduce his docu- mentary film on the Rolling Stones, in conjunction with a two-day sympo- sium of his work at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The symposium coincides with a major retrospective at the MFAH, co-curated by Anna Tuckcrr and Philip A. Brockman.

MEXICAN SHOW
FOR VICTIMS OF
EARTHQUAKE

Five portfolios of photographs by 39 Mexican photographers have been put together by curator Pedro Meyer to benefit victims of the recent Mexican earthquake. The portfolios will be exhibited in five American cities, then sold for $25,000 each. A major foundation has expressed an interest in buying all five portfolios.

The first of the exhibitions will be at the Houston Center for Photography. It was brought to the Center by board member Jose Kuhn, who is president of Continental Airlines Latin American division and a princi- pal in organizing this project. The exhibitions will run from January 10 to February 23, 1986.

FOTO FEST LECTURES,
SYMPOSIA,
WORKSHOPS

March

1. Children’s Workshop
2. Robert Frank Lecture
3. French slides & lecture
4. Adam Wolterborg lecture
5. Lithuanian slides & lecture
6. British slides & lecture
7. Swedish slides & lecture
8. Floreus Neussa lecture
9. Latin American slides & lecture
10. Spanish slides & lecture
11. Ernst Haas lecture
12. Ernst Haas workshop
13. Slides & lecture
14. Merci Del Rubenkoenlct lecture
15. Ernst Haas workshop
16. “Collecting” symposium
17. German slides & lecture
18. Japanese slides & lecture
19. Andy Grundberg lecture
20. Belgian slides & lecture
21. Hungarian slides & lecture
22. Czechoslavakian slides & lecture
23. Van Deren Coke lecture
24. Andre Kertesz documentary
25. South American slides & lecture

(All lectures and symposia will be at the Museum of Fine Arts, the Houston Center for Photography, the Houston Community College, the Riot Media Center, or the University of Houston)
EXTENDING PERIMETERS: (OF THE MARKET)

By David Levi Strauss

"The contradictory position in which contemporary art photography now finds itself with respect to both self-definition and the institutional trap- pings of its newly acquired status is nowhere better illustrated than in the head-scratching and rambles of museum curators confronted with the daunting task of inventing some kind of logical framework for the inclusions and exclusions (inventions and de-inventions) of photography in the museum." — Abigail Solomon-Godeau

From its inception, photography has been the target of negative mimicry. It began by questioning the division of art from science and technology. It challenged the perceptual and conceptual assumptions about time and space, continuity and imagination, accuracy and illusion. It questioned the primacy of painting. In so doing, it provoked a great deal of advocacy and virulent criticism, who were called upon to defend art from this perceived "industrial process." Thus began the battle for photography's place in the art world. This battle has been ongoing for many years, and the result has been the "art" world's understanding of photography as an art form. It has also been the result of many significant developments in photography, both in technology and in theory.

The practice of photography is an art, and it is an art that has developed in a variety of ways. The "fine art" photographers, in particular, have developed a body of work that is characterized by a genuine commitment to the medium, and by a desire to push the boundaries of what photography can do. The "street" photographers, on the other hand, have developed a body of work that is characterized by a more pragmatic approach to the medium, and by a desire to document the world around them. The "documentary" photographers, in turn, have developed a body of work that is characterized by a desire to tell a story, and by a desire to use the medium to communicate a message.

The "conceptual" photographers, in turn, have developed a body of work that is characterized by a desire to challenge the viewer's expectations, and by a desire to use the medium to question the way we see the world.

The "photography" that is shown in the exhibition is a combination of all of these approaches. It is a body of work that is characterized by a genuine commitment to the medium, and by a desire to push the boundaries of what photography can do. It is a body of work that is characterized by a more pragmatic approach to the medium, and by a desire to document the world around them. It is a body of work that is characterized by a desire to tell a story, and by a desire to use the medium to communicate a message. It is a body of work that is characterized by a desire to challenge the viewer's expectations, and by a desire to use the medium to question the way we see the world.

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New York, in 1977. Then, they were "towns in the henhouse." Now, they are waterfront families, familiar, wealthy neighbors.

The show is not at all transparent. One small room contains a useful gathering of investigations of narrative in serial photography. Pauline Botelho’s articulates four-image frame cuts across the narrative functions of her "Conversations." Diane Mica’s more interesting sequences, "Things Are Queer," has its success on its conceptual unity, as does Robert Cumming’s mock-evidential "Barrier Exposure," 1971. Jim Goldberg’s pictures make it apparent that the models for much word and image, "personal documentary," work comes not from art photography, but from popular and folk sources, like family albums. The subjects speak for themselves in Goldberg’s "San Francisco Hotel Series" (1979). Over the image, Mary writes, "We are always very affectionate Together," and under this her son Wayne writes, "My Mom Looks Pretty I Look Scared." Wayne, in fact, looks remarkably like the blond boy with a hand grenade in Central Park in Diane Arbus’ photograph of (1962). I wonder where he will appear next.

Alex Traub’s "Letters to My Father," (1976) stands in for the vast majority of work in this ven which is not made to hang on museum walls, but to circulate more freely in books and periodicals. The show does include a number of works which directly question the assumptions of art photography, in works such as Les Krims’ densely humorous send-up of (among other things) the "fractorial model." "Manifesto: View Art: Art Bank (for ART PARK): IrvingPenn: a Chinese Entertain ment: and Brooklyn: Another View" (1982): Alice Sweeten’s "Photography Real Snap Shot," 1973: and Robert Hensence’s "State of the Art / Computer Image Enhancement and Analysis / Fjulsand: Dec. 9, 76," all subversively funny. Nancy Burson raises questions about portraiture, authority, and memory in her computer-generated portrait of "Mannin," 1983. In Lucas Samaras’ SX-70: "Photo Transformation" V/2/23/73: only the extended hand is clear, while the human body in the background is literally effective. In the same way, there are moments in this show when the face is lost behind the fran tic manipulation of the image surface, when the medium obliterates the message. Against this tyranny of the "illusion of technique," one finds the inspired use of technique in Betty Hahn’s iconic Ione Ragner & Hinochi against a blue silkscreen. "New Mexico Sky," and Jean Louis’ exquisite crimson offset photofilm from the portfolio, "Presences." The inclusion of single images by Sonya Landy Sherman and Keith Smith does not do justice to their respective extensions of the boundaries of photography. Sherman in her wealth of work over time in machinic processes, and Smith in his sixty visual books. They remain outside Vandertree’s "perimeters." In the midst of all this furious technical innovation, Ruth Thorne-Thomspon’s small silver-tone prints have a pervasively intense approach. Lennart’s quietly masterful montages seems quaint in this context.

Kenneth Starr’s huge neo-expressionist canvas, "A Life Without Pain," takes a page from the Great Depression, for his earlier investigations in the way that photographic information is foregrounded and invested, rather than merely en dacted, no-yeah-meaningful dustins from the image culture. In some other work in the show it is not at all clear why photography was employed at all, except perhaps as a sort of reverse aesthetic tag, "this is new — it includes photographic imagery," (as opposed to the empty message of some "manipu lated" photographs, "this is art — it must be, it has paint on it.") The question of appropriate tech nology implies a certain respect for materials. This is evident, for instance, in the work of Joel Peter Witkin. His images of deformity, depravity, and desire would lose their confrontational pungency if they were painted or drawn. They are effective because of their photographic evidence or representation, and to the uncanniness. After the show of Witkin’s work at the Fraser Gallery in March, ten different people told me they objected to the work because it offended the delicacy of the body after death.

Extending the Parameters of Twentieth Century Photography includes the work of 126 authors. Though it will not necessarily tell you what is going on in contemporary photography, it will tell you what the museum is collecting.

The emphasis is on non-reproducibility. One of a kind precious objects are increased in value. One of the effects of this ac tualization is the demands of art to proper is to separate photography from common experience, the ephemeral character of taking one's own pictures. The visual literacy that comes from photography is the kind of elite consumerism necessary to the art market as is. Anyone who is interested in this can comp el an in understanding of what they are interested in: "the aesthetics of the conventional black and white print," in a way that they cannot par ticipate in. The viewers are required to make a leap in this show. This separation enhances the proper value of the art object. Art historians are extremely unhappy photography loses some of its unique power to reach or act on the world.

Footnotes:
2. Alex S. Weisman, "The Modern Public and Photography," reprinted in Classic Essays on Photography, edited by Alan Trachtenberg (Levetts Island Books, 1980). More than perhaps anyone his name has been an "Art medium" (Pierre Bourdieu’s term), an art prac ticed by everyone, it is antithetical to the kind of elite consumerism necessary to the art market as is.
7. Eds, "The New York Photographic Image" are on their way to SFMOMA in December, in the exhibition (Amour Fou: Photography After Art Photography) which organized at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., and on view for an or about that exhibition. In her catalog essay for this show, Rosld Krakauer writes, "Photography After Art Photography has been treated in reality transformed in a very new manner from what it was. Because always begins with a piece of the real world, photography can achieve this transformation.
8. Krauss also notes, "Photorealists later have increasingly confronted with the history of photography and sculpture and the other media is the "Blue Period," 1984.
oblique angles, that look sometimes almost as if hung upside down, the images fading through space. Wall colors and lighting often change quite dramatically on different moves to the next. One room is actually a deep and glowing pink. This is not a silver-frame-all-in-a-row photography exhibition. There are large blow-ups of certain key images and many of the prints are framed quite elaborately. Though I generally don’t like “museum pieces” for their lack of interest as photographic prints, here they have for the most part been well integrated into the show instead of merely tacked on. It is a risky business to include them in the exhibition, since in most photographic exhibitions they would look tacky compared to the craft of the other prints. It is precisely because most surrealistic photographs lack the look of an Ansel Adams that the panels are not out of place and are even appropriate to the exploitation of the photograph that is surrealist in nature.

Incredibly, this exhibition is very tightly organized. There is a deliberate pacing that moves the visitor from the facades of the “real” world to the juxtaposed world of the collage, and finally to the fantasy or obsessive world of images that increasingly use manipulated techniques. As the rooms unfold, the content moves inward from the light of day to the dark of night, building the sense of surrealist creativity, the Freudian unconscious. At one point the exhibition literally gets darker and the accompanying imagery deals with what the Surrealists termed the “base” imagery of surrealism—a Jacques Boffard close-up photograph of a big toe, Man Ray’s “Mammon” document to D.A.F. de Sade, Raoul Ubac’s, “The Battle of the Amazonas,” a solarized image in which the bodies appear to be melting. The show recapitulates the evolution of the various stages of surrealism. The early images are much more “documents” that were the camera’s ability to record reality at the same time that it can stretch it from that context, thereby transforming it. Thus we see Brassaï’s photograph of a rolled bus ticket stub, that is entitled “Involuntary Sculpture” and his photographs. Also, included in this first room are photographs by Jacques Boffard and Rinko Kawauchi for Andrea Breton’s book, Nada. These are Parisian street scenes and have the obsession with the ordinary and the banal, but without the haunting quality. To surrealism, Breton said: “Paint a woman waltzing.”

To photography, I think he is an interesting example of a missing link, the Surrealist movement that is strongest when viewed in the context of this show. Though some artists view the exhibition can be confusing. If for some misguided reason you think you are going to see a “greatest hits” of surrealist photography show, there is much in the exhibition that is there to illustrate the revised text rather than for art canonization.

Photographs often make many worlds within the context of the surrealist publications where they received their first airing. While the collages, photographs (here, rayographs), and prints are all in a similar relationship to the process of surrealism. However, some of these images were made or used to illustrate specific texts and others were used as images in their own right. Also, the dedication of some to a rigorous exploration of the medium of photography seems stronger than others.

In the heart of the exhibition are two rooms whose walls are painted shades of pink. In them are some of the more famous images of bodies: torsos by Man Ray, mirror distortions by Man Ray. Though these images are more familiar and more often reproduced than some others of the exhibition, they are rarely seen together and the effect is to impress upon the viewer the seemingly endless obsession that these photographers had for the female body. But it wasn’t just the subject that was an obsession. It was also the variety of ways that they photographed women. Woman became a foil for their various investigations, being transformed through radical framing, double exposure, solarization, etc., until the reality of a particular woman disappeared altogether, as in the case of a Brassai nude that can be seen as the curators point out viewed both as a truncated female body and as a phallus. This is also apparent in the photographs of dolls by Hans Bellmer that occupy the second room. These rather large (approximately 20”x24”) prints tinted in pink, blue, and yellow are from a series Bellmer named as “Les Poupees.” These strange dolls with moveable body parts were parts were constructed by Bellmer and then photographed in contortionist positions. In these images we are often confronted with incomplete anatomy or multiplication of parts such as four legs instead of two in her essay, “Corpus Delecti,” Krauss states that the dolls occupy a dream space and that within this space...” the doll herself is phallic” and that the “double” of body parts is akin to what Freud called the “Mesusa effect”— where a multiplication of phallic symbols serves as a protection from castration. Citing Barthes, Derrida, and Freud, Krauss concludes that “surrealism can be said to have explored the possibility of a sexuality that is not grounded in an idea of human nature, or the natural, but instead, women of fantasy and representation, is fabricated.” As you can see, the is no coffee table art book. Krauss’ analysis is complex and she has lived up to her role as a controversial critic (she is the co-editor of the critical journal October. Whether you agree or not with Krauss in her analysis, Bellmer’s prints, in particular, are also extremely beautiful objects and, set up as they are in the pink rooms, worthy of the fetishistic activity that is museum going. The exhibition is accompanied by a certain amount of wall text that is important to read if you are going to understand the organization of the show. That is not to say it isn’t compelling without the text. It is, however, it is the book published concurrently with the exhibition that answers the questions the exhibition poses. Dawn Ades, an English art historian, provides a very useful essay on the roles of photographs in the various surrealist publications. Jane Livingston’s essay concerns the work of Man Ray (who is by far the most represented photographer in the exhibition) and comes to the conclusion that he is not actually the complete surrealist. It is here that it becomes clear that even the curators are in some slight disagreement over just who played what role in surrealism.

Krauss has written two essays that, though difficult as I mentioned and stubbornly dense with practically impenetrable semiotic terminology, are very provocative and provide a basis for linking the photographs to surrealism and also explore the linkage of the surrealist injury, the photographic subject, and most importantly the photographic process.

Footnotes

1. This information and other references that follow are from a phone conversation with Jane Livingston, Oct. 16, 1985.


3. I am not the only one to note this. Dawn Ades in her essay, “Photography and the Surrealist Text,” notes that Michel Beaujour also found these photographs “banal” and she more. Krauss in “Inexactly the medical observation style” that Breton wanted for his book, p.162 (Ahmou Fou).


5. Both Kraus and Livingston readily admit to this disagreement. Kraus refers today to her first essay, p. 40 (op cit). She finds Man Ray central to the surrealistic aesthetic.
PARKER, PURCELL: LIBERATORS OF SPIRITS


Rosamond Wolff Purcell: Macaque. 1983

By April Ripper

Rosamond Wolff Purcell and Olivia Parker are often compared for their parallel sensibilities. Similarities undoubtedly exist, in the form of vital energies, a spiritual understanding (far beyond an endless quoting and imitation) of history, timelessness. Aside from the obvious references, however, exist two artists who draw upon mutually intuitive, universal concerns and the fine art of collecting, but whose differences in methods of working within those similarities are of greater interest.

To the extent that Parker and Purcell syndicate visually historical references with a collective consciousness approach to translation, they do so in a fashion that is as painterly as it is photographic. (Both use Polaroid materials.) This allows the viewer the enormous pleasure and luxury of having one's senses guided, emotions orchestrated: because so many references exist, there is more than enough stimulus to draw upon without feeling the claustrophobia of such enclosed (yet infinite) spaces. Rather than having to fight a feeling of being manipulated, the viewer's only potential hazard is sensory overload. The use of found objects (again, a collective spirit is called upon, but a wholly unique process results), rhythmic, musical and sculptural juxtapositions, and a synthesis of masculine and feminine aspects (the obvious feminine symbols found in flowers or keepake iconography, the aggressiveness, experimentation, challenges issued underlying the masculine side) constitute a philosophy and resulting methodology, but serve as starting point only. Both Parker and Purcell liberate the spirit contained within the objects that so inspire them. Although Purcell makes more use of the idea of collage and Parker more the idea of still life, no distant scrutiny with either group of images is possible — each pulls the observer into referential participation, a response initially unobserved but ultimately passionate and engaging. Purcell accomplishes this through a more objective, detached stance, that of an observer, whereas Parker's point of view is more romantic, personal, impassioned, participatory. Both artists call upon an instructive, moralist overlay, the antique imagery and objects supporting this (including the use of 19th-century ambrotypes and other kinds of old photographs), yet do not proselytize. The synthetic nature of these appropriations stands up to an organic operative, the resulting equilibrium rare, indeed. The apparent contradiction is found in Purcell's elevation of the ordinary, the breathing of fire and life into static, representational symbols, and Parker's domesticating, subduing, and finally integrating the unusual or out-of-hand. The intelligence and requisite metacritical craftsmanship imminently and finally places these images into a category that knows no equal.

Parker's markmaking varies from advanced to naive (a fine example of this is found in "After the Barn Door" 1984, where a representation at home, reminiscent of a cave drawing, is covered through flowers, prisms, and indefinable motion in the frame, all conspiring to create a dream-like circumstance). Color references depth: the older work (see Signs of Life, her first book published by Godine in 1978) was characterized two-dimensional, using toning for "color": the newer images, especially the 20x24 inch Polaroids, demonstrate more evidence of depth. Oddly, in this work, less attention is given to the purity and subtlety of color in the background areas, perhaps a mark of acceptance of or concession to the Polaroid material's limitations. For example, "Turning Trees," 1985, sees true-to-life color and form — roses floating in space alongside antique iron tools, both equally unanswerable. The works, in a quite different way to address reality versus illusion. There exists a continuum in the lyrical movement of the inanimate — although once humorous (most memorable, the dancing pea pods in Signs of Life), an evolution toward whirly now predominates (see, for example, "Four Peas," 1979, in her most recent book, Under the Looking Glass, 1983, an image in which glowing red embroidery thread is tied to, but doesn't support, a chorus of sagging peas). There is a brilliant suggestiveness to the use of shocking patches of blue surrounded by otherwise muted colors, the subsequent emergence of depth assuming an anachronical status that might otherwise go unremarked. "The High Flying," 1984, includes examples of this, and uses, among other devices, scale, play, illusion, and a bizarre, surreal sense of order that is difficult to question in spite of evidence contrary to realistic expectation or plausibility. In this image, cherries sit next to a drawing of a grand old building, all elements compartmentalized in a frame-like box. There is a formality to the presentation that reminds one of botanical specimens or naturalist studies (the fascination my grand- mother's arrowhead and other archaeological collections held comes immediately to mind), the catalytic stimulation of memory, a pleasant by-product of examining Parker's pictures). Her vocabulary evokes the pantom of dreams — it attends to and forms a visual text that neither acknowledges nor disowns the recognizability of the "thing" that are so transformed as to defy definition. Two powerful examples of this are "Interrupted Information" and "The Burning Glass," 1985, gorgeous tonal renderings of flowers and shadows, the latter taking on structural as well as referential form (light informing structurally, suggesting impossibility). A less ephemeral subject matter is found in some of the black and white works of a few years prior (for example, "Dawn," 1983) — heavier, more recognizable things, including metal chain and tools, are incorporated and explored, yet retain their visceral ability to float and waft before one's eyes. Close scrutiny is of
little help in unravelling these puzzles. Purcell creates chaos and disorder from subject matter that is difficult to perceive as subservient. Once neutral, existing imagery, such as architectural renderings and illustrations, become integrated—grounded—after a very painterly fashion, assuming an entirely new character based upon a ruthlessly elusive system of referral and reference. Exceptions are found in a series of images, including dead monkeys' skins. She carefully studies the relations between objects and icons, the coherence when the two are joined, that stim memory executed with a scientist's detachment. The resulting data, a contemporary historical remake, is comprehensive, often at odds, and (one suspects) skewed. The presence of an object or form may be unidentifiable, but it is influential nonetheless, suggesting a compulsion and layering of time. These mysterious areas in general evoke an emotional response; one rests there, refreshed by the abstraction, then able to wander back into the demanding visionary world within the frame. These scenarios are more pointedly historical, both in terms of physical aspects and intended messages. A windowpane motif is used (often shards of broken glass remain as editorial aides). In many images, there is carryover from frame to frame; others seem fragmented, the interruption on the surface incidental, non-sequitur. One begins to imagine apparitions, spawned from the always-whirling movement of a vortex, around which the image unravels. Any serenity is deceptive, for herein lies a language of intensity, one which pushes the capacities of assimilation to the limit. The collective screams and sighs of the universe are locked up in Purcell's constructions. Tom postcards, marbled papers, skeletons, anatomical illustrations, references to death, old photographs, refracted, suggestive human forms, often hovering watchfully, add to the element's dry, powdery appearance, as though disappearance is imminent; the pieces as a whole, however, hold solidity and weight, and serve as an authoritative resource. The physical integration of material never competes with or overpowers the vision—the alliance is remarkable if a bit theatrical. Objects are used more as players, personas, activated by the instinctive anima of an aggressive idea. Some of Purcell's titles are elusive, even though directly referential or voyeuristic: 'Write a Letter to Your Congressman' incorporates faces, both sculptural and photographically rendered, with a larger measure of recognizable imagery than usual. Other titles are more descriptive, without affectation: 'Pachyderm' in no way prepares the viewer for an excercised and resticted monkey whose arms reach upward pleasingly, as it floats on iridescent flower petals, or 'Monkey in a Box', whose gestures of sorrow are contained in tight quarters. The most potent of this series is the least graphic or illustrative—In 'Monkey Eat', the body of the animal blends into the background, and the hair on the head is offset by its different coloration. The desiccated feet and ear (highlighted by the orangish hue dramatically swept back) appear to be scattered, or casually fallen as in repose. This series is difficult, sorrowful, terribly evocative (not unlike the moody portraits from her first book, A Matter of Time, published by Godine in 1975). Purcell's use of color is hypnotic, luring the viewer into a false sense of saltness. At times monochromatic in spirit ('Eye' uses minimal coloration), the usage calls to mind aging, an assertive ambiguity. In wandering through the photographs, one feels the intimacy of bearing witness to a thought process as well as a finished product (evident in, for example, 'To be Erected for the State of New Hampshire' or the table-like 'Angels'), the story of a b ispake, cows, and their caretaker, a horse-drawn cart in which cargo is diminished to nonsensical status, and a dog with a gasmask, bespeaking Purcell's interest in World War II. A more still-life treatment is seen in 'Trouble at the Bottom of the Old Plant Garden', where nature is mass-appropriated—seed pods become as secrets emerge. And then, one is confronted with a powerful and insightful contradiction—the insertion of a contemporary image showing a woman with hands clapped and bound by a coiled snake. The snake's head points upward, lying flat against the woman's body, faces almost touching. This surreal vision (found in the first book as well as the second, Hatfield, 1980, Godine) is characteristic of the surprises lying in wait for the intrepid observer.
PLAYING IT AGAIN: Post-Modernism on the Move

By Paul Hester

"Frankly, part of what drew me to the idea of photography was the fact that I’d never really liked my work. I’d sold photographs since the early ’70s, but I only sold, was successful, but I never liked my work. Ever. Because I didn’t. Obviously if you don’t like your work, a logical alternative is to take someone else’s and call it your own. The activity of becoming seemed reasonable. I started to think of the camera as a sort of electronic version of the public I would take didn’t really need anything done to it, they didn’t need to be re-shot or printed or pasted. The photographs that I had presented had to resemble, as much as possible, the photographs that had initially attracted me. It was a matter of being as pre- sumptuous and as wanting to own Richard Prince, in Aperture.

Confronted by the bewildering ap- pearances of new photographic strate- gies, the photographer is adrift, needing a new guidebook. In the spring, the Wellcome Museum of Modern Art in New York published John Szarkowski’s The Photographer’s Eye, in which he defined the criteria of what made a photographic photograph; in terms of form and def- ined those criteria as if they were inherently photographic. Although support- ing the cold and short-sighted view or graphic reproductions has directed most of these publications toward images considered safe enough for the coffee table. But for whatever reason, much of the writing has been too limited to interconnect statements be- tween competing camps. Neither of these strategies has been useful to those of us wondering just what the hell it is we are doing.

It is therefore coming to cross the efforts of curator Sam Samore and the Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe in Playing It Again: Strategies of Appropriation, a show of appropriated photographs by contemporary photographers. The best way to choose is to look for a way to educate their prejudices after initial rejection of such unimportant works is through exhibition; not to exhibits.”

NEW: Post-Modernism seeks to dominate the cultural agenda — autonomy, authenticity, originality, self- referentiality. Post-modernism belies in the power of mass production — with the concomitant loss of the art object’s "aura" — as Walter Benjamin so aptly postulated. In fact the mod- ernist "harken, self-expression, is a stronger motive for the art object than the artistic act..."

Sarah Charlesworth, Rider, 1989

reproductions of the work, state- ments by the artists, an essay by Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon- Godeau, and James Hagner. All the in- clusions are there for the post- modern movement, including a usual context in the matter. Not all the
artists statements are helpful, but the statement by Barbara Kruger in- cludes her awareness position among these workers by its clarity. "In the hope of coupling the incantation of works and pictures and watch them stray from or coincide with your no- tions of fact and fiction. I see my work as a series of attempts to run certain statements and to wel- come a female spectator into the au- dience of men."

OLD: Didn’t Duchamp do this sort of thing already with the Mona Lisa? NEW: Certainly Duchamp gave us the "readymade", but his functional manufactured objects were just at the "optical" points of his time. His in- tention was to introduce the everyday object into the realm of esthetic dis- course. . . .[Shore] Levine attempts to uncover the hidden and the unknown, and when we dream of the way we have to come to know art through these past traditions. How photographs them- selves simply disappear. . . .

The lowercase text beneath NATURALIZATION REAL: "Duchamp, this is you, Mr. Photographer." The Photographer has dedicated the text to his travel habits in his [nl] this his. He returns his look. Be like THIS GEN: zero mier (Playa del Carmen, Mexico) through his own book, "Photography and the Cultural Imagery of Erosion, Translation, Voyeurism." His

SPOT

WINTER 1985
An exhibition of Richard Misrach's desert work, selected from the series which he calls Desert Cantos, will be open at the Houston Center for Photography on December 6 and will remain there until January 5, 1986. This interview was held in late September.

By Peter Brown

PB: Tell me about your family, your background.

RM: I was born in Los Angeles in 1949 and pretty much lived there until I was 17, when I went to Berkeley to go to college. I have one sister, she's three years older. My father was in the sporting goods business, with my grandfather. I guess you could say my mother was a conventional housewife.

PB: Any kind of family visual interest?

RM: My father was a kind of photo buff. When he was a kid he had a dozen cameras, and we were growing up he always had an 8mm movie camera and he used to do the family outings. We had a pretty active family. We'd go skiing and on trips. To film everything that the family did, he ended up sticking the movie camera in my hands, so I did a lot of that. When I was a teenager and I'd go on skiing trips with my friends I used to make little films — more like home movies. But I was into it.

PB: Were sports a particular interest?

RM: Well actually, surfing and skiing aren't like team sports. Skiing was always a very meditative sort of sport for me. It wasn't really a sport, it was more of a process... It's more like a dance, at least the way I thought, than a sport; you know, rhythm and movement and all that. I just enjoyed being out there. It's very important for me to be in a physical environment that feels good when I'm working. I've been to certain places that were visually interesting, but that I didn't like — too cold or too wet or just didn't feel right.

PB: Did the desert enter into your consciousness early on?

RM: Yeah, that's important. When I was five or six years old, my father had a friend who talked us into buying three blocks of land in the Mojave Desert, out by Edwards Air Force base, with the idea that base would expand and all those soldiers would need housing. It was a big investment on his part and of course it was a total bust. But he did buy these three blocks and he named the streets after his family, my family, and me. I just came back from Nevada last week and I was driving toward the Sierra Nevada and they have to try to find the place. I turned off a street to start looking and I ran right into Richard Street. That was real strange.

When we used to go skiing in the Sierras and we used to have to drive through the desert, I remember it being very eerie and not liking the desert at all, particularly at night. I remember we had a flat tire once and I kept thinking loggers would jump out of the bushes.

PB: Some of the black and white work in the desert certainly is spooky stuff.

RM: Yeah, in fact, when I first started working there, I didn't like the desert. I thought it was an ugly, barren, empty wasteland — all the stereotypes of the desert. The Carlos Castaneda books about Don Juan came out around the time I started that project. I was interested in a kind of a funky, American symbol and also the kind of mysticism that was popular. So I went out there. The first day I just walked around in the late afternoon. The incredible heat, stience, and stillness were very powerful — and positive. I guess it's about the first time I appreciated the beauty of the place.

PB: Why did you decide to go to Berkeley?

RM: It was very good academically. I needed to get away from home and Berkeley represented an alternative to what I was used to and I liked the politics. It was the tail end of the Vietnam war, and that was the time of the very heavy political stuff. I was pretty much involved in that. That was the time I really started taking pictures with a 35mm camera of the riots and the tear-gassing and all that.

PB: Did you take any classes in photography, were there any offered?

RM: They had a couple of classes in the architecture department, but I didn't want to take them. I finally took one when I was already seriously involved in photography and Bill Barnett wanted to flunk me because I wouldn't do the assignments that he wanted. But he and I became friends. I was getting my degree in physiology, and my senior year I was kind of bored with academia and there was a facility called the ASUC Studio, which was an editing, lithography, ceramics, and photography studio for students and faculty and people related to the university. It wasn't accredited, and there weren't formal classes. The facilities were there, and if you wanted help on a print, you'd bring it out in the light and somebody'd look over your shoulder and say, well it's too dark or too light or you need more contrast. There were good people there. Dave Bohne officiated set up. He set up a real simple structure and he had a protege, Roger Marin, who took over after him. I worked with Roger and saw some of his work there. That was my first exposure to fine art photography. It just blew me out of the water that photography could be so beautiful. I had the sense that this was something I'd want to do, so I started doing it. After I graduated, in 1971, they offered me a staff job, kind of a glorified janitorial position, at the Studios. The classic structure at the studio was: nobody would say a word about anything — if you got a grant, you were making progress. And that was it. So you would just keep working until you got a grant. I'd go in the darkroom, develop my film and make some prints and bring them out and Roger'd look at them.

I photographed the people getting fucked over by the police and all that, then I did a trip to Europe, and started photographing more fine art sort of stuff. Probably the biggest education I had besides the studio with Roger was the books that were published then on the West Coast — mostly the landscape books, White and Adams and Caponigro. I started making landscapes, I did that for about a year, and then I realized that was kind of a dead end. The next stage was moving towards the documentary work, which resulted in Skylight 3 A.M. in 1974, which was the book of photographs of Berkeley street people.

PB: Were there other younger photographers that you were friends with at that point?

RM: Yeah, there were quite a few. The people who came to the Studio here in Berkeley were highly motivated to make pictures. They weren't doing it for grades or any thing like that. It was a fairly inter- gent base of people, who maybe didn't go on with photography but who were doing really good work. In fact, in those early years, there was one year when Steve Fitch, Paul Herzoff, and I received NEAs and Roger received a Guggenheim. None of us was aware of the bigger art world. We weren't exhibiting yet, we really didn't know about that. We were very naive at that point. We'd heard about an NEA for photography and we thought, well, we'll apply but it wasn't like the kind of consciousness there is now about getting grants and having shows. In fact, most of the people hadn't had shows when they applied for grants.

PB: The Skylight 3 A.M. book — how did that get off the ground?

RM: Leonard Sussman, who was a staff member at the time, told me that if you really want to make the medium a language that you can speak with fluently and artistically you have to do it every day. You have to photograph and print on a daily basis. I took it literally. I wanted to get away from the landscapes and I started photographing the street people in Berkeley. After three or four years I started getting a little sick of the work and said, you've got a book here. So I spent about two years just photographing my book. Because Roger was my guiding light on all the work, after I finished the book, I sat on the press with him, he helped me organize, design the book, and get the money for it. I was living on $3,000 for a year and a half. I didn't have any darkroom. When the studio would close to the public at 9pm, Steve Fitch and I would print all night. I did that until 1978.

PB: How do you feel about that work now?

RM: It was interesting right after I did the work. I was intensely involved I just did it, published it. When I looked at it at that point I was bit burned out. I think it was a little bit confused. It was somewhere between art and documentary, and it really wasn't that exceptional as either one and it was trying to do both. My original purpose was to make a social statement, ideally to effect social change. I realize that actually it was a coffee table book that most people couldn't afford and when people looked at it they said how beautifully printed, how aesthetically interesting, it didn't do what I thought it would do. I learned to live with that and moved on. Ten years later now, all of a sudden the book has valid historical information. I am liking the book now for a totally different reason than when I had made it. I think it has that effect and it's something you can live with. The meaning, the information, the period of time I think it's well represented. In that sense I do feel good about it.

PB: Then comes a major shift. The desert work.

RM: Photographing people was really draining. After that I went to the desert to isolate myself. I had needed to do that for a long time.
PB: Why did that happen?
RM: The political atmosphere changed at Berkeley, and there was a cultural movement toward Eastern thought - the health food kick, meditation, the introduction of Zen. That clearly had an impact on me and so did the Castaneda books. I was also reading Caddell, Blake, and Yeats, and all that visionary literature that came along with the Castaneda books. I think a combination of that general shift in the cultural winds, and the reading I was doing got me interested in something different.

PB: Why the desert over other places?
RM: Because of my familiarity with the desert from my childhood. Also, because of the Castaneda books. I was really intrigued with the desert from the first book and my first experience going into the desert corresponded with that very highly. Out in the desert I would find myself reading each book over and over, trying out certain exercises.

PB: How did you decide on a particular place in the desert?
RM: Then I mentioned to a woman in the ceramic studio at ASUC that I was going down to Arizona, searching for cactus, especially some that looked miraculous. She said there was a place near Tucson that has incredible stands of cactus. So I figured I would am for that. I drove all the way to Tucson, but I couldn't locate it. I asked someone at a gas station if he knew where these stands of cactus were. He didn't know what I was talking about. I said, well, forget it. I started driving home and about 20 minutes outside of Tucson, going into the hills, I saw what looked like pinnate-like gestures on the mountain. I thought, that's weird. What is that? My intuition said that is the place to go. So I got off the freeway and I started driving and about 15 or 20 minutes later I realized it was these tremendous stands of cactus. Through some back passages I went over the hill and found myself in the Saguarito National Monument, where you find stands of cacti like you would find forests of redwoods or pines.

PB: Does intuition generally play a role in your work?
RM: I am always relying on instinct and intuition. The best work I have done has been work that is rather than work that is intellectually calculated.

PB: Any examples?
RM: In my most recent work I have had a number of weird encounters with fire. I am very skeptical of the way we package Eastern ideas and I don't feel comfortable with them, but these encounters are so coincidental that in some ways it can't be coincidental. I am not sure what to do with them. I am skeptical but I get involved with them and I see where they lead me; they lead me to amazing things.

PB: That fire business. I know you had a fire in your Emeryville studio. And then there was a fire at a printing lab where you lost a lot of negatives, then this fire series out at the desert...
RM: Well, for instance, the fire at the Emeryville studio was on February 18, 1978, and the fire at the Angerstrom — the lab that had all my negatives — was on February 18, 1982. On February 18, 1983, in the early morning — I didn't even know it was February 18 — I was in the desert. There was a groove of palm trees I wanted to go take a look at and photograph. I went down and walked around and looked at it. The light wasn't right to photograph, so I went back to Palm Springs to the museum and did some work there. Later in the afternoon I decided to drive back out. I was driving out and I saw this huge plume of smoke. So I went over and found this fire

that was so dramatic I couldn't help but photograph. It wasn't until later that night that I realized it was February 18th. That really shook me up, Bizarre. And those three events are only a scratch in the surface.

On February 1, 1984, I went to Hawaii and I decided to take my camera. I had been in Hawaii for a week when I flew to the big island. That night, the minute I landed, the volcano went off. We called some friends to see what was happening. Nobody had ever seen it shooting up a 1500-foot column of lava. The volcano had been dormant for 100 years. We went and picked up my friends and took them and showed them. I photographed it the next morning at dawn and by late afternoon the eruption had stopped.

When I photographed the space shuttle in 1983, I took one photograph of the shuttle landing if you are shooting an 8x10 camera you obviously can't stop a space shuttle in motion, but I did want to take one snapshot for my son. I found out three days later that when the shuttle was landing, the interior of the cable broke into furnace, which they put out. I'd love to see if the time of the fire correlates with the time I actually released the shutter. A lot of coincidence.

PB: Good lord. That is really incredible. Back to the early desert work: a book was published without title or text. Why was this?
RM: Actually Lew Thomas was a big influence and we were good friends at the time. We were having these meetings in my studio about once a month with about 12 people. Nearly everyone there was involved in the photography language or conceptual art at the time. I was about the only one at the time working on 'straight photography,' very traditional image making. One of the things I felt was the absence of text was in fact the most powerful text you could have. Text that is used in photographic books is usually very superficial and arbitrary and hard to do with the work inside the book. Text titles serve to code the book to influence the reading of the book. I realized I would rather use a photograph as a title, as a visual image as the title, rather than a word or words. Normally you have a title page or, say, a dedication to mom and dad, that doesn't have anything to do with the text. Normally the text is on the back of the book or the wings of the book — you know, quotes from curators, critics, authors, and writers — and that is hype. None of that has anything to do with the book. So I went page by page staring with the cover and decided what text would work visually. And by page four I would just feel I didn't need anything and the last thing to give up in terms of text was page numbers. My gallery really wanted it to have page numbers. I said, how would collectors be able to order prints? They're all pictures of the desert, and there is no way to distinguish them. The page number would allow the collectors to say they want the image on page number 32 or plate number 46. I realized that doesn't have anything to do with the communication of the book either. At first, I was not going to have anything on the spine, except Lew said you gotta have it or it won't be a book. There are a few things that have to be in a book in order to be a book, and it was a book, not a portfolio of reproductions. Those critical things we put on were the Library of Congress number. After the number the retail price, the publisher, and a copyright symbol with my name next to it, on the spine. Everything else was eliminated. That was the reason behind it, part of it was to remove the noise. The stronger the book was to point up the misuse of language and the misdirection of attention to the fact of the use of text.

PB: From this work there is a shift to color and much larger images, and you begin to work in a rectangular other than a square. How did that come about?
RM: I was using a 254 camera. When I was in Hawaii working on that project, photographing the jungle vegetation, my camera broke and I didn't know it. It kept vignetting the bottom third of the frame. I got back and most of the images were cropped off at the bottom. I paid a lot of attention to accidents. You can go prepared and the world always provides so much and then you have to rely on chance for probably 90 percent of everything that happens, which is one of the things I like about the photographic process. So, in the case where the bottom of my film was chopped off, I liked what I could do with it. I took it where I could. I printed the work larger and it got me to a rectangular format; it became more interesting.

PB: Do you print your own color work?
RM: I did. Then I stopped. Sometimes I print my own contacts. I don't have the equipment to print the large prints. It is very expensive.

PB: How do you feel about that?
RM: No problem at all. In fact, anything it has freed me up. Some-
times I wish I were printing. I like printing, and I could probably get a little better results with some of my prints. But I have a wonderful printer who taught me everything I know about printing anyway. Ninety-nine percent of the time she does wonderful work. It just gives me so much more time to shoot, which I think is best. For me in the last three or four years I feel a growth in my work, the evolution of my seeing dramatically speeded up because of the time I have spent shooting.

PB: How do you feel about the " fugitive" qualities of color, the fact that it will fade over time?

RM: It bothers me, but it has recently been improved dramatically. I don't know if you know about the new Ektacolor Plus materials.

PB: You print most of your work on the Ektacolor Plus paper?

RM: Yes, and before the Plus came out, on Ektacolor 76. I did a dye transfer portfolio and I had Cibachromes made from negatives and they were all right but they weren't as beautiful. They didn't have subtlety and beauty. They didn't correspond to what I was trying to do. The Plus paper is better now, it's supposed to last a lot longer. It's discouraging to think all the work you are doing might fade, but I'm not doing it for posterity or to make money at the end of all that other stuff.

PB: What do you do with your negatives? Do you keep them refrigerated?

RM: Some I keep frozen. Ones I am working with I have to keep on hand. The ones that are important to me I keep in a safe deposit box in the bank. I have them spread out.

PB: You lost a lot in the fire?

RM: No, I lost about 3,000 IlfoDs and 1,000 2½s. I lost most of my Hawaii work. Most of my Greece work. All my Louisiana. About 3,000 negatives from the Desert Cantos project. I still have a few contacts of that project. In fact, some copy prints from the contacts will be in the show at the Houston Center for Photography. I was hoping to do more of that. I'm going to save all these. Maybe five, ten, fifteen years down the road I'll really be able to save them with the new technology.

PB: The fire must have been a devastating experience.

RM: It was bad, but it wasn't as bad as you would think. The thought of it is unbearable, but the reality... You just have to keep working.

PB: In this current desert work, how do you get around, how do you cart your film around, what's your general procedure?

RM: I got a VW van that I go around in. I have three big picnic ice chests. I don't keep ice in there, but I keep the film in there. Generally, if it's cool during the night, the coolers will stay cool during the day. Once I shoot the film, I'll wait a few days, and when I have 50 or 70 exposures, I'll pack them up and ship them express to L.A. and the lab will develop them.

PB: And do you have a little dark space in the van?

RM: Yeah. I have windows that have black curtains and I unload and reload film every night. Block off everything; pull over and find a relatively dark place, and change film in there. It's a pain in the ass. I really like the ease of working with 2½ and not dealing with the weight, slowness, changing film, and all that stuff. But I've learned a lot about patience.

PB: Tell me about this new work, Desert Cantos.

RM: I've been working on it for about five years. It's the most extended project I've ever been involved with. It keeps expanding in scope, which I really like. The more I work on it, the more layers evolve, and I don't see an end in sight at this point. "Canto" simply means subsections of a long song. In literary history, there is a long tradition of cantos — Dante, Ezra Pound, and on and on. With Dante, and particularly with Pound, they were epic projects that took lifetimes. I think Pound worked on his Cantos for 35 years, maybe even more. Recently I found an obscure book from about thirty years ago on his cantos; talking about what the problems were and the epic nature of the work, the kind of criticism that he encountered, the difficulty of looking at the work because the work is very dense, it's very difficult to understand. You almost have to read it as a dream as opposed to any progressive, linear, rational thought. Once you realize that, it changes your whole attitude. It had a big impact on how I designed the structure of this book that's just coming out. And I see it as an epic project for me — there are so many layers to this thing. I think the ultimate goal here is using the desert both as a place and as a metaphor, dividing the two: one is visually powerful, and it's a mal place, loaded with symbols and meaning. At the same time, because of the extreme nature of the desert, the harshness of the desert, it becomes a strong metaphor with association to the Bible and the history of literature, science fiction, the Twilight Zone... The desert is always this big metaphor for life and death, and God and the Devil.
HOLLIS FRAMPTON: COMPLEX MAGIC
By April Roper, (with special thanks to Stan Brakhage)

"Style is the adoption of a fixed perceptual distance from the object." - Hollis Frampton, from Broke- nogle Scrapbook "Stan and Jane Brakhage (and Hollis Frampton) Talking"

The Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY assumed the organization of a retrospective exhibition in one of the films, photographs, essays and mixed media art of Hollis Frampton in the manner of a massive and difficult undertaking that had begun earlier at the University of Texas, El Paso, Mexico City Museum and was subse- quently abandoned by that institution. Hollis was also involved in the project in its inception until his death, at age 48, of cancer. It was conceived with the assistance of the long-time companion and collaborato- r, Mr. George. Thus the thriftiness of importance granted and attention paid to the imagery select- ed for this exhibition — its artistic context and annotation — is never in ques- tion. (Stan Brakhage, a long and colleague of Frampton, and an ex- traordinary independent filmmaker, remarks, due to "these poetic and mys- tious attentions to the arts occurring in a fury." It is clear that much con- sideration was given to curatorial discretion and restraint, especially with regard to the selection of films.) Frampton carried out ideas over lengthy periods of time, with many works progressing from one medium to another.

An interest in the initial ex- counter with Frampton's work, to devote much time to reading and penslogging of the attendant (and voluminous) texts and essays that accompany every piece of work, and a lot of the work of the long ago. Yet so much is readily available to the in- voluntary viewer, most especially the frame of Frampton as complex disciplinarian, a seeker in constant motion; Lagona Giora Art Museum is to be commended for mounting as about the film. I am, of course, as well as film retropective and lecture) as this: one feels compelled to specu- late and come up with some ver- atile, conservative, museum-goer's reason: to first, verify whether a favorable response with out prior, essential knowledge was possible, due to the expansive and appropriational, based on the struc- tural movement of the (1956) nature of this work. On a strictly super-level, Frampton's art and essencer, she gave me an enormous feeling of the modernist approach to modernism — concerns regard- ing the overwhelming, plastic, textual, and narrative.

Frampton's genius (being singled out in the late 1970s, as a child prod- uct led to a precocity that evolved, over time, into a vista of the most important (not only for information, but an outlet for its assimilation) returned him repeatedly to an endless search — it is improbable that any one medium could have been singularly satisfac- tory or sustaining. As a youth, his studies ranged from languages (and an interest in the occult) on to biology, the (translator of Homer) to mathematics and literature; among his teachers at the Academy were Frank Stella and Carl Andre, later, an obsession that led to the City. He also studied painting and photography during this period. He began correspondence with the Academy at the age of five in college (1956), and the two formed a strong bond the following year, with frequent correspondence on the law of St. Elizibeth's Hospital and the medical profession of the film's main character, "Wound was confirmed. It was during this period that an interest in poetry and fiction also developed. He con- sidered himself a poet, a "tentative" for the next few years.

The Bergsonian ideas of "secondary" and jobs are as astonishing as the collected works, for example, a seven-volume anthro- pological study from German into English, because Roud measured that he did so. Samukt, Chinese, Russ- ian, and Greek were among the other languages he studied; Photograph- ry was ongoing until 1972, when he began: "tentative experiments in film." Photography, from then on, would serve to fill in gaps, answer- questions. He had become involved with computers (ideologies more so than generative systems) in the late 1970s, and continued with the inte- gration of video, film, and computer language in order that the gulf be between art and science be bridged. It was often said of his films, because of their analytical nature, that they were cold. (Of course I got to be typed as an icy, fixated, one- man with his cinematic calculus, which might angrily move me and hurts my feelings." Frampton said in an in- terview with Scott MacDonald in 1975.) It was a great source of the- gle to him that artists found the sciences local, and unfeeling, whereas scientists perceived the arts as warm and emotional.

Perhaps, one of the most resource- ful approaches to understanding Frampton's ideas underly the strange and complex films and pho- tographs exists simply in recognizing the difference in the way he pro- ceeded thought and translated it. He found thought to be very sensual; he once paraphrased the French poet Baudelaire to Brakhage: "People might think the way they stroke velvet or a woman's thigh."

Each Frampton abandoned a form, it was because he had lost in- terest in it, thus he was in constant search of a medium. He was one of the first to experiment in Xerography. In the film prostasia (1979), in which he uses a homeplate to burn twelve of his photographs, in chronological order he both hates the viewer with the
concept of memory and plainly evi-
dences that he does not wish to be
hung up in his past. [In 1969, John
Baldessari burned all his paintings
and sealed them in a wall in the
Jewish Museum in New York.] Nor
is there a more passionate example of
revelation than The Film Critical Mass.
This brings up another aspect of
the issue of his being unfeeling: there
exists a contradiction in the encyclopedic
thought that underlies the intricate
systems of classification he applied to
his vision and the Duchampian humor,
the light and pungent touch that
defies the viewer (or reader) to take
seriously what is being offered. In the
preface to Las Kinkis book Fitzroy
Takinghorns, Frampton depicted, as
he did in his essay on Atlantis re-
discovered (Circles of Confusion:
Texts 1968-1985), the power of photogra-
phy. . . . in an age without refriger-
ation, the photograph was a kind of
formaldehyde, superior even to
words, serving to immobilize Reality
until Culture should inexorably meta-
bolize it to Knowledge. There exist
innumerable anomalies in the form
of endemic deviations, all the purest
representations of thought processes
trough each of Frampton’s periods.
[In particular was his departure from
the norm when he taught: he created
an entire semester’s course on
the films of Brakhage. For example.] The
most potent and revealing clue came
by way of anecdote, again from Brak-
hage: although Frampton had an
extremely dry wit (and attitude in
general), he was a sloppy wet kisser.
In all likelihood, the visual repre-
sentations of so prodigious a mind
cannot ultimately serve as notation
of concept, rather than as end in
itself. In this case, although there
output attempts otherwise, the
context, when called upon to stand
alone, generally fails to live up to the
methodology that preceded it, and
the myth that accompanies. Another
contradiction exists between the joy
of listening to such a dotty mono-
logue, the running conversation
reminiscent of an elderly, charming
relative filled with and driven nuts
by useless and fascinating information
imparted in pedantic delivery, and
the depressing falsity of such meuric
thought. The ambiguity that
characterizes much of the photogra-
phy is magnified by the master-narrar-
tive style of the accompanying texts
and titles. He wrote a great deal for
such publications as October and Art
Forum.] Yet another the most
ambiguous image: the more powerful and
lasting it is for example. “7. 763.” From
the nautical portfolio is a shot of a win-
dow taken from below. One sees
a reflection in the shape of a chandelier;
an ornate ceiling: not much informa-
tion beyond cliché is imparted. Then,
slowly one becomes aware of a sen-
tence written on the steamy surface of
the glass. I like my new name. It is
wondrous that he sees the chandelier,
which had been wrapped during
the room’s renovation, as reminiscent
of the tents of caterpillars. It is also the
causal sort of observation that begins
then to overpower the image, dominate
the viewer’s own formulations and
dreams. Or perhaps Frampton saw
things that he then denied the viewer
access to via verbal smokecreens. It
is an intensely compelling process;
nevertheless, others, artists assimilate
into their imagery what they do not
understand. Frampton’s definitions
were absolute, thorough, influential,
and as a result somewhat limiting. His
gardens and parades were endless, and
executed with regard, taking on such
diverse characters as Miron White
and Louise Nevelson. His reverie
was stylistic after the fashion of the
1970s and 60s impracticality. "Ways to
Purity", [1959, is a series of twelve
black and white photographs. Most
of the work is in series] that chronicle
the frequently traveled route
between his apartment and Frank
Stella’s, above the Purity Diner. The
pictures themselves are of found sites
— interesting textually but unmem-
orable. The series entitled ADSWYS
ADSWYS [1952] is based on an analysis
of William Henry Fox Talbot’s work,
and Frampton’s concept of “two dif-
f erent sorts of perceptual time”: the
historic and the ecstatic. The former
reflects the more practical aspects of
the image, including time, the latter
(where the theory most closely con-
nects to Talbot’s pursuit of what he
called “natural images”), the more
metaphysical, in which, “...an ec
statical moment, time is not” (from
Frampton’s Circles of Confusion,
the chapter called “Inclusions in History:
Segments of Eternity.”) Each image in
the series (color), dedicated to Hollis
Frampton, Sr., is accompanied by the
most engaging of the texts, at times
rambling and possibly meandering,
but objective and instructive. The
texts contain myth (“it is a general
belief that he is aware to hear through its
skull”), editorial commentary (“cuttle-
fish” [one of a pair of specimens cost-
ing $1.39 purchased by the author at
King Chong Co. 3527 St. Manhattan
in November, 1987]), to scientific or
ontological origins. The concept of
time runs rampant throughout the
work, and takes various forms: "Notes
of Passage," [1983-84]; with Marion Fal-
er, is a series of twelve black and
white photographs of a wedding cake
topped with symbolic icons, pro-
gressing from birth to death. The
series begins and ends with an un-
adorned cake.
An example of the double-edged
parody Frampton was drawn to ex-
ists in "The Secret World of Frank
Stella, [1958-62]." It was conceived as
a spoof of The Secret World of Picto
Piccolo, he photographed Stella in
intermittently for several years, contin-
ing the joke with the intention of
creating a "private cliché" (to him a
"peculiar notion of seeing"). In the
paragraph it concludes this, the pho-
tographs to have been "bad.") Number 52
of the series shows Stella in an alumi-
num washbowl facing away from the
camera, it is soft, with motion, after
Stieglitz (Frampton did not distance
himself from influences). Others from
the series portray Stella as movie
star in trench coat and dark glasses,
and sitting against a wall, terribly
frightened. The power of this series lies
in its disparity. There are many por-
traits of friends, artists, their paint-
ings or studies, which have a catalog-
ing spirit similar to that found in the
color Xerox work (of canned good
labels, among other things). One en-
visions a child emaciated — over-
whelmed by — a new toy or game,
yet the images in their unfeigned-
less seem off-handed, shaped impul-
sively. A fair amount of collaborating,
borrowing back and forth of imagery,
seems to be another undeniable mo-
tional force. For example, James
Rosencrantz needed a photograph of
spaghetti, to be included in a print-
ing. Frampton allowed the remaining
plate of pasta to deteriorate, and
photographed the progression over the
course of several weeks (“Spa-
ghetti,” [1964] from The Nostalgia Port-
folio, 1975). The Reasonable Penicilines
and False Impressions series (1977,
1979) seem more developed, the for-
er includes Xerox collage, hand-
coloring and text, the latter montage
and Xerox.
Through much has been written
on Frampton (mostly about his films,
few if any workable definitions can be
created. So much was said by him,
the intention being to create, not
finalise dialogue. Questions were ex-
pected to arise from questions, as
though this comprised the freedom,
in discourse, of thought. The answers
he gave, as absolute or other ide-
ological tracts, were playful, stirring,
at times disputed, in the process of
becoming not existing as givens. At
times, it appears as though this core
of filmmakers and painters fol-
lowed each other around, completely
self-absorbed, marvelling at the
freedom they were able to deviate;
Frampton’s work bears traces of this
exclusivity. But he had a magical way
of being in the world, and the col-
llected works speak well of this.
The magic lay in the constructs: he once
said that birds have five songs — they
say, “good morning.” “I found a
worm,” “fuck me,” “get out,” “good
night.” Therein one discovers an
everlasting sensibility, ordered magic,
approachable from any discipline or
point of view.
NIC NICOSIA: ONE-FRAME MOVIES

Nic Nicosia: “Domestic Drama,” and “Near Modern Disasters.” The Houston Center for Photography, September 6—October 10.

By April Rapier

No news is good news. Nic Nicosia is sticking to his original explanations (strict, academic, formal), not throwing any curves to those in pursuit of understanding him. This is very good — it signals a continuance of the work that has progressed in so orderly a fashion, along the same lines — with no abrupt switches to divert either artist or audience from what goes on. As far as what goes on is concerned, I suspect that there is an alter-ego at work/play here (Frankie Paul as Nic, being interviewed by Life and Newsweek magazines). It has been said of the interior he creates that they are patently false, modeled after movie sets or cartoons; I find the actors who populate them to be equally implausible. They are, under Nicosia’s tutelage, playing out social, personal, and political dramas in a manner fabricated and intended to make the viewer contemplate and react to that which one might ordinarily ignore.

They also guide the drama, altering it beyond his control, which suits him fine. He has an unabashed regard for his influences (Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, John Divola, John Pfahl), yet no state of the art, obligatory homage is apparent. (The intelligent child at play is pure Linda Robbennolt in spirit.) The only conclusive parallel he can be persuaded to draw is between his and Bernard Faucon’s work...

Inserted in the text of this essay are excerpts from a discussion with Nicosia. My questions were gib; his answers, insightful and sincere. I warned that Nicosia might be so compelling as to be incapable of being written about. I warned that Nicosia might be so compelling as to be incapable of being written about. (There are, after all, the early Disney cartoons sometimes violent and macabre.) When I mentioned that sometimes people didn’t “get it,” what he was trying to do, he said, “I don’t get what they’re trying to get. It’s all right there.” Emotional response is the key, not examining topical clues within the sets. (Apparently, the Akron Museum audience “got” it — they thought the work was funny.) Perhaps one of Nicosia’s most revealing aspirations for an image is that it be a move in one frame. “Near (Modern) Disaster #6,” a hotel lobby more closely resembling a ward for loony Californians, seen from in front of an elevator door. illustrates this narrative quality well...

When asked to comment on his meteoric rise in recognition (publication in Life, Newsweek, and The New York Times; inclusion in numerous distinguished exhibits and collections), he touched on timing, publicity, and the support and enthusiasm that Linda Cathcart (director of the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston) has for the photographs, but speaks of himself as indistinguishable from the work. Thus he tries to get people to know him, a pleasant experience because he is absolutely guileless and solicitous about what he does and who.

Although he crosses many media lines in creating a set, the finished piece is photographic. The confusion generated by this has granted him the most success in museums, where emphasis is less on medium than content, with marginal response in either conventional or photography galleries. That there still exists a rabid prejudice against photography as art was demonstrated when Ultra magazine called Ms. Cathcart for suggestions as to excellent new artists. As she began describing Nicosia’s work, she was interrupted by the writer exclaiming, “But that’s photography,” though the two were mutually exclusive.

Nicosia’s formal training is in film, in his pictures, anything and everything can and does happen, as in the movies, or comics, or pop paintings. He has adopted a perfect balance between being as innocent as he seems and as astute as his work and success would indicate. That he relies so heavily and confidently on fantasy to impart a stronger, more lasting sense of reality seems a contradiction until one eerily misses his own opposing mechanisms, which make one a believer in the power of an interior, whether defining a physical space, or an interactional variation between strangers on the street. Opposing forces prevail — he accomplishes what is essentially unstable, unsuitable for close scrutiny.
Peter Brown's stories are lovingly imparted, whether verbally or visually, which may be the only uniformly memorable aspect of the work. Gathered over the past two and a half years, the pictures in this exhibition are diverse and subtle, and chronicle the voyages of a person who is endlessly amazed and delighted by what he discovers, one who searches patiently and is extraordinarily lucky to boot. With or without text, this exhibit (like "Sessions of Light," a previous portfolio of work) is a quiet delight with occasional, well-placed bursts of energy that startle and amaze.

The work ranges in tone and content. There are meditative, minimalist interiors (a continuum from earlier work), in which color (browns and blues recur) serves to annotate or extend mood, to fix in memory — as though washed over in color — what is easily felt but difficult to describe. There are also sentimental family portraits, records of reunions and the attendant changes magnified by distance and time. ("11 Sleppin," 1981, for which a woman recedes, facing away from the camera, in an attic bedroom with flowered wallpaper, is a fine example of this.) The emotions are heartfelt and universal, yet transcend the ordinary or obvious. They demand of the viewer a forward perspective or progression of thought — there is no swoop, no looking back. Some pictures are tongue-in-cheek, and mostly irresistible; others — the rugged, four-wheeler driven gone are of interest because of the struggle and commitment involved in their execution (2 1/4 square or 4x5 format was used to make all the images). The images that generate the least excitement are those that rely on a more formulaic, pastoral tradition: an older woman in her yard, enclosed by a white picket fence, or a tree burning with ripe peaches, for example, are images in which little emotional investment is demonstrated. Other portraits (of strangers) offer little more than a fleeting glimpse. One, in particular, however, of a man beside a red truck seems very different, very personal and revealing. Could it be that the success of portrait encounter with a stranger relies on a straightforward formula as flat light versus sunshine (the cloudy day images maintaining more of a distance than those bathed in the warmth of the sun)?

These arguments are of little consequence, however, in the face of such dynamic imagery as a grass fire cutting across a field, rendering the back half of the image hazy, Frenzian-like, the front retaining its clarity and sharpness. This image, as others, normalizes the strangest of occurrences, making them accessible, familiar. The use of color here speaks clearly, dramatically, as it does in an image of a child swimming through an inkly black lake, or a hiker going up a barren black mountain, the path only slightly lighter in tonality than the surrounding terrain. Neither image relies on additional information for its grace and impact.

Another wondrous moment occurs in a photograph taken from a dock: an aligator is swimming toward the camera, while a dog, whose feet and head only show on the side of the frame, bears disportion witness from a safe vantage point. The dogs partial removal from the frame reinforces his reluctance to get too close.

The situation in this image (and in another entitled "Momos on the Move," 1985, in which another dog patrols an icon world, the probable result of a broken nose or sneezer, perhaps created on purpose) is not extraordinary except for the dizzying timing which serves to distance them from the reality of reference or possibility. Other moments that are more about travel transport the viewer to places known in memory (collective being the most likely) but not readily plausible: a motel in the West on a cold, clear night,2 particularly evocative in the recognition of feelings called upon, or the mural that adorns the side of a building in a small town, complete with deer, Hoover ads, and a line about the heart of Texas. The spontaneity of these unconstructed images is their beauty. They represent a race with time, a competition with the perpetual, irreverent changes that people are likely to rail against without the realization of conviction. Often the topographics occur as interiors or still lifes. The most intense representation of this unique genre takes place in a fruit bowl, with a map of European mountain peaks in the foreground just under the bowl, a reference to muralist imagery. The map is reflected in the bowl, and all objects — tomatoes, eggs, etc. — are utterly transformed. A similar picture, an exterior still life containing an ice Capades truck, pickup bed, and fruit trees, has the same quality of light — serenity amid the chaos of average modernity. This occurs in a similar manner in a landscape of snow, with little color pushing through. Four black cows in a row form a dividing line to the right, a cold blue sky comprising the top half of the image. In discussion, Brown has mentioned an interest in pushing the notion of the romantic image to its limit, without digressing into more blatant evolutions. He has succeeded in doing so.

The timeless quality, perhaps a function of travel as much as anything else, is seen in several different kinds of images, ranging from a portrait of Brown’s father after having mowed his fields (time here circles and threatens to land), to a flooded fruit tree orchard (time where time extends in a linear manner). The definitive image, one that incorporates all sensibilities and manners of dealing with the chance encounters the road offers is a portrait of the first town to be entirely nuclear powered. In this image, entitled "Rodway, Class of ’91, and his dogs," 1985, the viewer is presented with an extraordinary vision, using a graffiti-carved mountain (more black numbers than mountain surface) as backdrop. In a yard dominated by an enormous satellite dish, a boy jumps on a trampoline (and is caught in mid-air). This remarkable yard is enclosed by a fence, as though it were somehow keeping the manic-inhabitants from wondering two dogs pose on the outside of the fence, beside a small, obligatory stab at a flowerbed (this part of Utah seems terribly dry). The pine trees, fairly majestic in their own right, are dwarfed by the said, violated mountain and tv antenna, tributes to a dim future. The exhibit offers a special opportunity to visit a world quite different from the one we know, if only due to the condensation of the vaguely familiar nature of the subject matter.

A.R.
BOUBAT, DOISNEAU: WITNESSES

Experiencing the photographs of Robert Doisneau and Edouard Boubat allows the viewer the purest sort of pleasure: a voyeuristic experience enriched dimensionally by their historical content. Boubat’s pictures, some drawn from travels over the world, are those of an invisible voyager who dearly loves what he sees. Encounters are kept to a minimum, and are functional, supporting his capacity as director of an image.

Edouard Boubat

Robert Doisneau

perhaps his patience is infinite and his input on the image and its subjects was minimal. No matter. Few photographers are able to venture outside their realm and maintain such an open-minded, neutral eye. “Jardin des Plantes, Paris,” 1960, a picture in which a nude reclines in a sunny garden, bears homage to Poussin. In another, “Parc de St. Clou,” 1958, a couple and a statue of a couple are seen at opposite ends of a park, in identical poses. These pictures, as others, are graced with a keen sense of humor. Even the more obvious travel-related images that Boubat chose not to pass up are joyous and gently genial, and rendered with great care, breaking free from the stock formula of cataloguing unfamiliar terrain. Doisneau is a more demonstrative photographer, his images bearing evidence of being choreographed. This is not to say that they are, nor is it an indictment of staged imagemaking, no matter the time period. But they feel a bit encumbered by a voyeuristic stoopidness, whereas Boubat’s influence is quiet, suggestive. One envisions Doisneau as stolid, Boubat as innocent of device or mannerism. Both portfolios are equally important, however, with regard to historical and sociological implications: the context of realism never comes into question. At times, Doisneau’s approach seems docu
dmentary: one sees a newly wedded couple crossing the street en route to a bar; in a subsequent shot, the couple is inside, he drinking from her glass, surrounded by a beret and two watchful onlookers. Another shows a bartender gesturing to a less-than-captive audience, a tenuous style lost on the crowd.

One wonders how he was able, in a well-known series taken from inside an art dealer’s window in France, 1948, to capture the varied reactions to a prominently displayed nude. The responses vary from scandalized to wholehearted approval. “La Manee Chez Cigelles,” 1946, is of a bride on a terrace; she is preoccupied with the playfulness of youth soon to disappear. Her groom is nowhere in sight. It is wondrous to bear witness to Europe in the 1940s and 50s, albeit second-hand: the hysteria and uncer
tainty of a pre- and post-war time country are sublimated into a grate
ful, rhythmic dance of normalcy, one aspect in a vast range of work in this exhibit which inaugurates the new home of the Benteler Gallery.

COURAGEOUS WOMEN: IMAGES OF STRUGGLE


This exhibit of photographs by Judit Sedwick was based on the Black Women Oral History Project of the Schieffelin Library, Radcliffe College, and a series of public pro
grams was held in conjunction with it. (It opened in New York City and has traveled almost a year thus far.) It was widely and generously spon
sored, with a good deal of advance promotion accompanying. Upon en
tering the ornately beautiful hall where the images were displayed, all
sense of hoopla and the attendant painstaking work required to assem
ble a body of images of this nature subsided: one was left to confront
calm, dignity, assuredness. Each pho
tograph was lit by a small brass light attached to the frame, giving the
room an intimate, warm feeling.

Many of the portraits are executive style — formal, carefully groomed and posed, impersonal; they honor the sitters well, but don’t speak clearly to the viewer beyond a care
fully constructed public image. Others leave the viewer reeling with the power and magnificence of the sitter. In these images, a lifetime of struggle and hope highlight the beauty born of conviction and courage. Each im
age was accompanied by an encyclopediac biography; through reading and viewing, one is struck by the historical and social impact and requires nothing of these women made upon the world.

The portrait of Miss Scudder Allen, a granddaughter of Jefferson Long (the first Black Member of Congress that perhaps bears no relation to the Southerner’s war record whose presence at the table and expression bespeak a mar
velous, stoic soul whose wisdom and kindness could penetrate the
least discerning mind. The image tells of a woman who lived exactly the life she fought. It incidentally provides the most visually interesting setting — an unexpected and inexplicable mixture of glistening block, soda fountain spoons, marbles, and flowers, bathed in gor
geous muted lights and color. Kath
leen Adams, who graduated from Atlanta University in 1919, (the diffi
culty implicit for a Black woman, in obtaining a degree in the early part of the century, seems in retrospect to be massive and overwhelming, yet many of these women did so, and all went on to be distinguished educa
tors, community leaders, or profes
sionals) was photographed wearing a coat and hat, a touching detail; her entire life is there to see in her glorious face.

Many of the women honored are “firsts” in banking, schooling, arts in American history associated with shameful exclusion and subsequent pride; a few of the gestures and ex
pressions seem to illustrate the point that perhaps the struggle, no matter what the accomplishments, was less meaningful in the face of the trage
dies of injustice that remain. The portrait of Ophelie Pearson Wise, the first Black woman to be em
ployed in the banking department of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, holds her hands in a manner that...
seems to bespeak this point. Most portraits are triumphant; however — junc
tlance sustained by the serenity of having acted in good faith. No one
seems to be self-aggrandizing or in need of recognition. In fact, a
remarkable percentile characteristic of many of the images. Christina Adair; a
Houstanian and longtime community organizer and civic worker (photo-
graphed in front of a mural depicting aspects of Black life) gives the in-
pression of eschewing praise for her endeavors, so innocent is her de-
nemeanor. No sense of struggle is in evidence; her joy is radiant as she
tentatively joins her hands and smiles with the photographer.

Another "first" was Sadie T. M. Alexander, who in 1921 was one of
the first three Black women to earn a PhD. These amazing facts supported
by beautifully simple images have great impact. Sedwick deserves enormous
credit for not allowing sentimentality to be the guide. (The quint photo-
graph of Rosa Parks, the courageous woman who tested the practice of
Jim Crow in 1955 by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white, triggering
a bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala-
bama, has the same kind of escalat-
ing momentum.) Perhaps the most
significance example of a private mo-
ment between subject and photog-
rapher occurs in the photograph of
Lena Coleman, a physician who taught
at Howard University and worked in
a migrant labor camp in Hereford,
Texas. Her dress is simple, as is the
setting — a wooden house, a stained
glass window, blurred greenery in
the background — yet a world of
compassion shines through, and no
words of explanation are necessary.

JERRY UEULSMANN:
DIFFERENT
REALITIES

Judy Sedwick: portrait of Kathleen Adams, from Women of Courage

Conceptual European photography is at once elusive and deliberately
strait-laced (sometimes to the point of banality), due to a shaky
Alliance between the peculiar mode of overintellectualized ideas and dull or
ordinary visuals. The Uelsmann (who, while not European, is closely aligned
with the genre), Lichtsteiner, and Neuss’s exhibition contained exam-
ries of the best and least exciting of this genre, imagery that could be
described as mystical, dreamlike, in-
tellectual (this last category constitu-
ing perhaps the essence of the work)
bit too frequently, at the expense
of clarity). In this manner of pursuit
of ideas, the thrust of the pictures is
that of control, the manipulation of a
situation to the end that the audience
ultimately be manipulated as well.

Through Uelsmann, the power of
the dream can be conveyed by a
way that is effective visually as it is emotionally.
Uelsmann exhibited a retrospec-
tive of almost ten years of pictures, the
novel (1975) containing a ridicu-
ulous duo entitled “Texas Fantasy,”
numbers two and three. After years
painting idiosyncrasies over the years
nothing prints, these two photo-
graphers are obligatory and simple-
minded, falling back on facile, tired
motifs — the shape of the state, an
armadillo, and a cowboy boot — to
represent what would be better left
unseen. No amount of technical ex-
pertise (and he is a virtuoso) could
redeem this short-sighted mockery.
There exist other justifications
that fall short: orbs hovering over
paupers, casting shadows within
faces superimposed on sensuously
shaped rocks, a person walking on
water, birds flying about indoors,
other too-obvious devices. This
more literal imagery simply cannot
transcend technique. In one sense,
his movement toward physical simp-
lification (‘tis more ‘being a per-
tusive precedent in life as in art)
gives the viewer more room for in-
terpretation, access to participation
within the frame; however, is severe-
ly restricted by further trivializing
tired abstractions.

At his best, he is the acknowledged
master of the transposed dream.
world. Icons (faces being used often)
spring up in the Wholes of places,
never losing to surprise and delight.
Mirrors and globes become receptors
for the ideal — the spirit or ego that
comes and goes, not at anyone’s will
in particular. Upon close examination
of any given image, the blending of
two or more negatives becomes
understood as usable information
(although the actual means of execu-
ion remain unclear). Yet this dislo-
cure fails to dispel the magic created
by combining, say, indoors and out-
doors, or appreciably different land-
scapes. A comfortable yet severely
surreal image (“United”),
displayed in an elegant room, richly
ap
pointed with oriental rugs, wainscot-
ing, a fireplace. Central to the space
is a drawing table that holds an open
book. A man has begun to walk from
the page onto the table. A partly
cloudy sky forms the ceiling overhead.
The effect, which lingers as viscerally
as visually, is unforgettable. That
the meanings contained within each im-
age are endless is of little concern to
that viewer not in search of a quick
formulation or an easy answer.

Uelsmann has remained, in the
face of controversy and criticism,
obstinate, relentlessly cryptic. All
implausible or impossible situations
are presented as though nothing is
amiss. If water is to appear slivery, it
is always a bit more so than seems
possible. Even when the symbols
become more referential (and thus
confusing) than anything else, the
overall effect, although frustrating,
is still compelling. A clear example
of this is found in “Untitled,”
where a knotted rope sits on a table
in a cloudy room with picture window
views behind. It is the Uelsmann as
creation of a different measure of re-
ality that most deserves renewed or
continuing interest, for these images
are infinite, born of ideas that need
not rely on beginnings or endings.

GEORGIA McINNIS:
PRIVATE MOMENTS

Private Moments photographs by
Georgia McInnis, The Houston Center
for Photography. September 6 – Octo-
ber 10.

Georgia McInnis, exhibiting concur-
rently with Nic Nicosia, disarmed the
audience with deceptively des-
scriptive titles, all locales duly noted,
interesting points of entry to a group
of lovingly rendered Texana treasures.
In going seemingly straightforwardly,
diminutive color photographs dead-
pan captions, the real became a
degree or more surreal — the unre-
markable with a twist, small, but
most of the time just enough — suffi-
cient to disrupt a passive, bucolic,
pictorial rendering.

Some images digress: although an
old plywood draped with weydria
in bloom is charming enough, the
viewer goes through the image in
search of that oddly (all taken out-
door) where we see a set of camper
caravans, floating bicycles, oversized eights posed on fences, yard charms which draws McInnis to each site, and is left
hanging. In these few, signs of ano-
ther era do not satisfy. All, however,
are graced with an empty ghostliness,
a being decrepitude, and evidence
of a personal search that may or
may not be best served by the
camera, but deserves to continue.
August Sander: Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance, 1914

Nightings, Virginia Woolf. Invent­ing lives for the three farmers and then hav­ing them encoun­ter his­to­ri­cal fig­ures, Pow­ers dem­on­strates an ap­proach that the mod­ern nov­el­ist fre­quently em­ploys—that of delib­er­ately and art­ful­ly cre­at­ing a sto­ry, a fab­u­lous struc­ture, find­ing its source, in this case, from the raw facts that the photog­ra­ph shows. Sand­er’s pho­tos might strike the view­er as cas­sial, spontaneous, re­al­istic. But it is far from these three. For Sand­er has used the same tools that the nov­el­ist em­ploys—com­po­si­tion, vis­ion, and de­ci­sion—to ac­com­plish this feel­ing of spontaneous­ness.

How may­ers­land that his grand­father was a pas­ser for Sand­er—and that print­s of the same pho­tog­ra­phy can be found in his mother’s attic in Chi­ca­go and in the liv­ing room of the woman who cleans the offices at Mc­A­word News—com­bines sleuth­ing and guess­work. When he sees him­self, or cer­tainly a per­son who looks just like him­self, in a pho­to­graph with Him­my Ford, May­ers rushes to Chi­ca­go to ques­tion his mo­ther be­cause he is too young to have ever pos­sessed Ford. The man with Ford’s arm around his shoulder, he learns, is his grandfather Peter; the same per­son in Sand­er photo­graph, the only one of the three to have sur­vived the carnage of World War I.

The photo­graph of the three far­mers doesn’t really exist until it is inter­preted, Pow­ers writes. And to do so means to in­vent “a fic­tion be­hind this doc­u­ment in­di­cated stretch­ing out through the years in both di­rec­tions, with­out begin­ning or end.” The tools­ one brings to this task are, first, a be­lief that fic­tion can be im­posed on re­ality. And sec­ond, the will­ing­ness to ac­cept “true, mis­rep­re­sen­ta­tion, in­vol­vements, false leads, and am­bi­guities” will get in the way. One sim­ply en­dorses, Pow­ers ad­vises, by gaz­ing steadily, like a pho­tog­ra­pher, through the order­ing, con­trol­ing, and dis­tort­ing lens.

There is, of course, noth­ing like “neu­tral look­ing.” Ev­ery act of mak­ing a pho­tog­ra­phy and, by ex­ten­sion, ev­ery act of view­ing a pho­tog­ra­phy in­volves in­ter­pre­ta­tion. Call such an ap­proach to look­ing at photo­graphs “post-mod­ern”: if you will, for it re­lies on wit, irony, the abil­ity to stand apart while direct­ing and manip­u­lat­ing the fic­tion sug­gested by the photo­graph. May­ers, ro­man­tic and ro­mantic, is por­trayed in the no­vel by the alter­e­go, called “I” who is ser­i­ous, a stu­dent of the aes­thet­ics of pho­tog­raphy, the one who tries to ex­plain his look­ing at his­to­ry through this one photo­graph. Their lives run par­al­lel courses, merge fin­ally into one. For the fic­tion is as sim­ple as it looks. Sand­er’s three

peasants record that his­torially “some­thing irreverent hap­pened to the scale of human ex­ist­ence.” In­ter­preting Pow­ers, tell­ing that some­thing that life itself has be­come ar­bi­trary and dan­ger­ous, filled with acci­den­tals and spa­cious (and space­y) room, full of light and soft colors. Alice in Won­der­land per­spective. Sides and spa­tial re­la­tionships are hard to plumb. An­ over­size mirror re­flect­ing the sea­son lead­ing you in and out of other places; a strange pink light on the wall echoes the span of large papers on floor and mirror, teasing us. What are we see­ing? Where are we? What is the scale of things? It’s hard to tell. It’s an intrigu­ing puzzle and a rath­er beau­ti­ful one. We float in and out of the room­ and in and out of Bart­er­ Parker’s re­ality.

The artist works with words and photo­graphs to­gether in a vari­ety of re­la­tionships. Word­play with im­ages, im­age­play with words. He prints words over, under, and alto­gether along­side the visual. Some sto­ries clar­ify the pic­ture, some befudd­le, some sim­ply give a twist, a dou­ble or triple en­try. It can be a con­triv­ing, in­trigu­ing, and fun. It may be of a very differ­ent na­ture and dis­turb­ing, Some seem like sim­ple­­ly stills un­til, on fur­ther ex­a­mi­na­tion, they go out of frame, some­thing away, off-center and unex­pected, which gives the work a new deeper mean­ing. This can be strange­ly disturbing. One such piece is a com­posite that in­cludes a peace­ful and fami­liar scene of church, tree, and road—only the
The urge to read our own desires or prejudices or fears into the photographic portrait is great. After all, the one sure way we have of understanding the other is to recognize in his or her portrait those emotional states we ourselves have experienced. So we find ourselves saying that a subject, in a certain portrait, looks sad or bored or tired. Of course, we have no way of really knowing if that is how the subject actually felt at that moment, or if that is a feeling the portrait has been conditioned to the subject. But we insist on believing in our reaction because when entering the territory of the unknown we first look for that which is familiar. Richard Avedon's portrait photographs, taken over the last ten years and collected in this book, make such a reading difficult. His subjects, whether drawn from the ranks of the "gitler-asts" (Susan Sontag, Philip Johnson, John Simon, Philip Glass, Maillepur himself) or from the ranks of the unknown do not enter into a conversation of shared emotional states with the viewer. Rather, it is their presence, their physicality, that appeals to us. His subjects engage us by their sensuality and as objects of our desire. Glamour, allure, beauty, grace, charm, mystery, and a tenden- cy to shock, at times, are qualities they all, to a greater or lesser extent, possess. How much we identify with those qualities or how much we want to appropriate to them to our- selves this determines how we read his portraits.

A portrait of Susan Sontag, dated 1984, appears at the book's mid- point. In an essay which opens the book Sontag describes the anxiety she feels whenever she is photo- graphed. This quality is immediately visible in her portrait. But what is also apparent, perhaps ironically, is how Maillepur has transformed Sontag into a vision of ideal beauty. It is next to impossible to read in her portrait Sontag's claim to the title of leading thinker/ writer of her generation. This is not a portrait of the writer at work, one that makes us appreciate the mental struggles -- the tensions, doubts, etc. -- which a writer like Sontag has endured. For here Sontag looks ever so much like the actress Candice Bergen. Maillepur portrays Sontag much as he does Paloma Picasso or Franca Raffaelli Thyssen or Barbara Jakubson, all sub- jects here, as women gifted with great beauty and concerned only with fitness or fleeting issues -- which choose to wear, how to comb one's hair, which piece of jewelry to select. In Certain People, one can see the range of styles of Maillepur's portraits. His corporate photographers project the blank neutrality one ex- pects of such works. His pieces that may homage to the traditions of the Hollywood glamour photograph (Kathleen Turner, Richard Gere) are hot, sexy, flattering. The great major- ity of these portraits are intense conversation pieces, particularly when seen in certain less narrative context. In a few are there environments. No props, no settings intrude to disturb us with their sym- "ence" and he doesn't understand why. To me, they are often serene, indeed sometimes almost Heine in their serenity - beautiful in subject and in print quality but lacking the drama, tension, and excitement that the words "eye of the storm" imply. I am defining by connotation here. I realize that there is supposed to be calm at the eye of the storm. But Maillepur's image of himself sur- rounding by raging madness as he makes his quiet pictures seems un- realistic. He describes himself as "railing a picture down while all hell may be breaking loose just outside the frame." Most of the images in the book are so devoid of life in the sense of struggle or tension that they leave me with a lovely visual record but a blank emotionality. They are pretty records of seascapes, fields, farms, and streets but empty of con- tent, only pretty. Maillepur's negatives (8"x10") must be perfectly technically. His prints are crisp, clean, and lucid. In the quality of the blacks and whites they are much like Ansel Adams', whose work quickly comes to mind as one glance at the book, and he was in fact a friend and mentor to Wolhauer.

The pictures of nude, on the other hand, speak strongly of Edward Weston -- the sand dunes, peeling paint, room-size eyes, his scintillating poses are all Weston reminis- cent. They are really quite formal. Nothing is revealed of the model herself or of what content the artist strives to express through them. They are curiously empty and dis- tant. He uses such props as masks, mirror distortions, reflections, and filmy fabrics. All of these are cliches unless they are expertly and freshly used. These aren't fresh. The images end by being magnanimous and glib. Even the skin texture, and interplay of bodies are not very sensual. They are pleasant but boring. There is a nice foreword, written by the artist, with notes on the taking of some of the pictures. He tells of his travels in Scotland -- where most of the work was done -- his adven- tures and his thoughts during the picture-taking. He writes of trying to eliminate a telephone pole or a vapor trail that ruined his composition. He seems to seek a perfect, unsullied, timeless moment without being confused or humanity. One wel- come exception to this is an image of a complex of prehistoric standing stones in Scotland, with a man sitting precariously atop one enormous high- stone, taking a snapshot. As an image it is startling, human, and wonderfully violent.

Very familiar is "Park Bench, Ed- inburgh," showing two huge trees extending into the distance and towering over a solitary park bench, dwarfed and lonely. Another nice image is called simply "Oak Trees, The Trossacks." It has a sense of mys- tery, the mystery one feels in the ancient oak forests of Scotland and fewest days, when the grasst and mossy limbs drop with we and the air is heavy with a quiet and foggy presence. Wolhauer cap- tured this well.

Less appealing and less original are images of cracks in dried mud, wooden vegetable crates in an alley, a row boat resting in front of a stone building. I closed the book appreciating the artist's technical skill and his sensitive eye but wishing for more whimsy, surprise, excitement, and unique vision.

**MAPPLETHORPE: A COMMITMENT TO BEAUTY**


The urge to read our own desires or prejudices or fears into the photographic portrait is great. After all, the one sure way we have of understanding the other is to recognize in his or her portrait those emotional states we ourselves have experienced. So we find ourselves saying that a subject, in a certain portrait, looks sad or bored or tired. Of course, we have no way of really knowing if that is how the subject actually felt at that moment, or if that is a feeling the portrait has been conditioned to the subject. But we insist on believing in our reaction because when entering the territory of the unknown we first look for that which is familiar.

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EXHIBITIONS

DECEMBER

Through Dec 7 2315 Commerce St Wilmotus.


Through Dec 14 Midtown Art Center Museum 2020 Cemini Rd. "Core: Works in Progress." Annual exhibition of works in all media by the members of the Glassell School's Core Masters of Rendition program.


Through Jan 5, Museum of Fine Aris Houston 400 Boschert "Nan- choli Nate." Photography and film in Wemar Germany. Tue-Sat 1-5, Sun 1-6, Thu 9-9.

Through Jan 6, Afterhours 2000 Rusk. Photography by gallery artist (see Art). Thu-Sat 1-5, Sun 1-6.

4 through Jan 6 Houston Center for Photography 944 W. Alabama, Richard McAvoy, April 1st. "Color Photography." Second of a three-series exhibition, curated by Maggie Cheung, also, the Center will have a group holiday sale and exhibition.

Through Jan 7 Rice Media Center University of Houston at Stoller St. (Entrance 475) on a tax-supported student work from 10-5, Fri 1-9, Sun 2-5. 468-6994.


11 through Feb 1 Bement 250 Colquitt "Coming to Terms." Photography by Ramon and Fred Baldwin.


JANUARY


Through Jan 5, Museum of Fine Aris Houston 400 Boschert "Monochromes, From Monochrome to Photographic." Photography and film in Wemar Germany. Tue-Sat 1-5, Sun 1-6, Thu 9-9.

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Through Feb 1 Bement Gallery "Coming to Terms." (see Dec listing)


11 through Feb 3 Lawndale Center for Photography 39 Mexican Photography an exhibition of a portfolio orga- nized by Pedro Meyer to benefit the vic- tims of the recent earthquake in Mexico; also, "The Photography Print: Extending the Boundaries," last of a three-exhibition series on the exploration of photography with other media.

11 through Feb 3 Lawndale Alternative 5601 Houston "War and Peace." Images of exhibits, performances, and other activities concerning women's creative efforts towards peace and free- dom. For more information: Houston Aris Women's Center, 528-4798, Lawndale Alternative, 920-4555.

24 through March 1 Waco Paces 1200 Franklin St. "Culture: A Look at Freemans." Town and Allen Park-

EXHIBITIONS ELSEWHERE IN TEXAS

DECEMBER


9 through Jan 19 Attraction Gallery Moody Hall, St. Edward's University. "Texas Realms," exhibition of an all-media juried competition; information (512) 553-5332.

JANUARY

Through Jan 12 Allen Street Gallery 2000 12th St, "Before the Beginning," photographers. Open to all photo practices including

WORKSHOPS / CLASSES

DECEMBER

7 HCP "Introduction to Close-up." Sharon Stewart, instructor, 40 minute, $50, $50, $50. 725-4793.

The Houston Photoclub Club 7, 3pm. 4th Mon. at the Bering Church, 5200 N. Fannin St. 493-5725.

Photographic Collectors of Texas 7th Annual meeting at the Color Place (400 San Felipe) 4th Wed. at 7, 498-5828.

1966 Photographic Society, 7pm. 1st and 3rd Mon. at Cypress Creek Christian Community Center, 6832 Cypress Wood Drive 

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