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Judith Bankhead, Untitled, 1993
from the Skin Deep Series
On First Looking into Sontag’s Photography

Susan Sontag’s seminal examination of the art form still evokes creative responses to photography as well as literature after thirty years in print. English professor Terry Doodley recounts his introduction to this book and its role as a teaching tool for his students.

A Collection of True Reports of Life’s Confusions


The Los Angeles Riots: Images Without Effect

The often split-second selection of photographs and video footage to accompany breaking news stories has impact that ripples far beyond the lives of the subjects of the news stories. Daniel P. Younger traces the effects of media opinion makers’ decisions in the context of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Risking Sincerity

A message of hope and healing was offered by artists participating in the Risking Sincerity symposium based on the exhibition "TEN: Between Two Worlds" at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. Reviewed by Jennifer Elkins.

Through the Body

"Unfinished Legacy" by Peter Hite at the Houston Center for Photography explored the sacred aspects of male ancestral relationships and their link to individual destiny. Reviewed by Ed Ossowski.

On Higher Ground

Keith Carter’s images of the Mississippi Delta included in the show organized by the Houston Center for Photography and now a traveling exhibition are accompanied by the words and impressions of writer Suzanne Winckler.

Lifting Albania’s Darkness

Martha Grevers traveled to Albania to uncover the hidden truths of a society shrouded in the secrecy of autocratic rule and found that the people she met were eager to share their personal histories with her. Karen Lidis reviews this exhibition at Pro-Jes Gallery in Austin, Texas.

Creating An Art Form

Liberman’s career achievement was not only his rise to success from an insubstantial start but the impact he continues to assert on photography through his work of magazine design. Alex: The Life of Alexander Liberman is reviewed by Holly Hildreth.

Where the Boys Are

Men’s crimes, perverisions and other oddities, dominate Stronger Than Fiction by Jim Stone. The book captures true images of the American male in the revelatory positions that are often thought to be confined to superhero tablets. Reviewed by Daniel P. Younger.

Books Received/Parting Shots

Terry Doudy

The night I read On Photography was very cold, and I sat on the couch, wearing my overcoat and drinking hot coffee, until three or four a.m. It was November 27, 1977; then November 28; Susan Sontag wrote the first draft beneath her name when she signed my copy of the book at Baisa Bookstore. I hadn’t read the essays when they first appeared in the New York Review of Books, so I felt as Keats says he does, on first looking into Chapman’s Homer: "Like some lone watcher of the sea / When a new planet swims into his ken.”

The planet Photography was a whole new world—I didn’t know then I also felt like little Linus, the character whose beloved blanket—"La Aladdin—and I didn’t even know what I did and didn’t know about it.

"Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything," Sontag says right off the bat, "are inescapable invitations to deductions, speculations, and fancy." To be told, with such grand authority, that photographs cannot themselves explain anything, that they are in no information, much less knowledge, was a great relief to me, because I had always thought they were and could never say to myself what they were knowledge of. One of Weston’s voluptron bell peppers couldn’t be just a bell pepper, it had to be something else. And as did Artaud’s pictures of urban snowstorms. Was I intended to feel this disorient? Or was I missing the point of some kind of monumentality? Or was it both? "Opinanatique at a staircase at Versailles! Images like these did not invite me to deduce, speculate, and fantasize. What I felt was horror and more urgent, Sontag wrote that photographs say, ""This is the surface. Now think—or feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be if it looks this way."

This is what I felt: the imperative to discover an essence and declare the code that explained what bell peppers about, and I couldn’t do it. Photographs, art photographs, made me feel as helpless as anybody does when, instead of being told the answer, you are ordered to guess its, in the old game of What Fe Teacher Thinking?

What I learnt of photography was limited to family snapshots—cannas go with family life... A family’s photograph album is generally about the extended family—and advertising: "Images which idealize (like most fashion and animal photography) are no less aggressive than meat which makes a virtue of plainness.” But these ad pictures had not been problematic until the summer during college that I got a job as a copy trainer at an advertising agency in Chicago. One of Foote, Cone and Beecken’s accounts was Dial Soap, and the Dial print ads at the time showed the smiling faces of people in the shower, who looked as if they had just swung their heads to shake away the water, above the headline: "Aren’t you glad you use Dial Soap? Don’t you wish everybody did?" I was told that 100 separate shots were taken to get the one image the agency used in an ad. The models often spent an entire day in the shower, shaking their heads to throw the water away with the smile of deep security they felt from using Dial Soap, though their hands and feet were, by the end, growing as wrinkled as the face of Lillian Hellman. And then I watched an agency art director, with a magnifying glass, study these hundreds of images on contact sheets to pick the next perfect one. The differences among the photos were indiscernible to me and therefore, I came to realize, more completely seductive. For the beauty of the models in advertising and fashion photographs like these, the perfection of their clothes, the ripeness of the moment caught, usually in some beautiful setting, pulled me very powerfully into a depth I couldn’t define. I longed for something I couldn’t name, something such as the story that told their essence, and have felt since that this is the closest I have come to feeling what Keats dramatized in the speaker of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Or, it may be my one experience of the kind of desire Lacan defined, which is by his definition unapproachable. But it is very strange and very diminishing to realize you have this feeling for advertising photographs rather than for a woman’s love, or some irresistible desire. As I came to these realizations that might, I was not aesthetically naive, but I was visually illuminating. So, reading On Photography was an additional relief as I began to understand that Sontag’s essay was not only about photography, but also about the aesthetics of Modernism, and it was as good, as brilliant, as anything I’d read on Modernism, even the first several chapters of The Period Essay. The excitement I felt reading also came from her style from the Latin "brilliance" that is actually the effect of her diction in which contradictions aren’t explained or reconciled, but simply elided as the speed she materialized insinuates that she never experienced a single moment of hesitation or doubt, ever. That kind of certainty can be a lot of fun when it deals with issues at the very heart of twentieth-century art—"the status of the object, the commodity status of the subject enjoyment to be impersonal, and the nature of the real." "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire."

By the time I got to page 87 and read, "Instead of just recording reality, photographs have become the norm for the way things appear to us, thereby changing the very idea of reality, and of reality," I felt freed. The secret, I realized, is that there is no secret. The aesthetics of photography is really, like all Modernist aesthetics, a metaphysics, but one absolutely opposed to the classical systems of meaning that existed. From this point on, I could better understand the "primitive" statements about拍 photography on which I had based the new realities of Modernism.

The approach is the reality. The essence is of the surface. Weston’s voluptron bell peppers change the idea of bell peppers by making us pay attention to exactly what a bell pepper can look like at the vegetable counter too. And one of Sontag’s most important, and among the most liberating, ideas is the power of perception that she calls "photographic seeing." It is an attention to the material surface that is very focused but demanding: "intense and cool," she wrote, both "irresistible and detached." These are perfect formulations of my own state of
mind, which I could never have made myself, as I tried to see and understand art photographs, to see and understand what wasn’t there, the absence we call depth, which isn’t even an absence in the thing itself but an expectation we bring to the thing that it should be more than it is, not merely an object but an idea too, metaphysically exact.

By the time I got to page 90, I knew exactly where I was home on the couch, not in the middle of the night, and no longer in Pynchon’s prose “beguiled under the epistemology.” Sontag continued:

"A painting has become more and more conceptual, poetry (since Apollinaire, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) has more and more defined itself as concerned with the visual. ("No truth but in things," as Williams declared.) Poetry's commitment to the concreteness and to the autonomy of the poem's language parallels photography's commitment to pure seeing. Both imply discontinuity, disarticulated forms and compensatory unity; wrenching things from their context (to see them in a fresh way), bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity."

All of this I already knew because I had been teaching these poets in English classes. And I liked, especially, two things in this passage, the way Sontag fits into a definition of Modernism "immediacy" as "bringing things together elliptically, according to the imperious but often arbitrary demands of subjectivity," which is as apt a way to think about Huxley's prose, the prose paragraphs of "The Waste Land," and her own pages as any I'd read; and second, the way she misquotes Williams. In "Patmos," he actually wrote: "Say it! No ideas but in things." The "Say it!" is as important as the more famous slogan because it can be read as "Say I." That is, speak the object itself, not words about it. Or "Say it!," which refers to poetry to the living vernacular instead of a culture-language like Pound's or the subsequent text of the "avant-garde." In any case, it's nice to come upon a mistake like this to let you out from under all the genre spout.

II

What I decided to make of that night was a course in Modernist poetry that used "Out of Photography" as its "Cliff Notes," but I didn't make the decision that night. The plans needed another element, as I discovered when I found John Szarkowski's anthology of images, Looking at Photography. Quiet, beautiful, and mysterious, every page of that book I will live now as much as I did the summer Saturday afternoon in 1979 I read it for the first time, without the need of an overcoat. Szarkowski's simple, lucid, grounded commentary facing every image seemed like light itself and gave me the idea that assigning a one-page paper about ten or so of these pictures, as they were also reading and writing about T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore, would be an least interesting for my students and, with luck, even valuable. The photos and the necessity to say them, as it were, would teach the students. I hoped, the meaningfulness of any fragment or any image outside some kind of discourse would teach them with Sontag's help that there are no essences that determine the truth that the thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird could just as well be 113 or 1,300. Words verbal signs always mean something in a way that visual images don't necessarily have to, and writing about photographs, I hoped, would help explain the ways in which meaning is always made. Finally, nothing like Szarkowski's interpretation that could occur among a relatively small, homogeneous group of every student.

I'm happy to say the experiment has always worked. The students come to like the one-page papers with all the rhetorical flannel awry. The images of the early "Canto" no longer seem so floutrian. Williams' coverage and the absolute clarity of his phrasing and lineation—his typewriter's equivalent of perfect pitch—become apparent. And Marianne Moore, who has nothing to do with photography, remains as outrageous and incomparable as she should be. The aesthetics of photography don't make Modernist poetry any simpler, just apparently more familiar.

III

In the opening pages of "The Order of Things," Michel Foucault wrote:

"But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, of symbols, or similes, what we are saying. The space where they achieve their splendour is not destroyed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax."

The force of his insistence that "neither can be reduced to the other's terms" is especially interesting in the context in which it comes in his great essay on Velázquez's Los Meninas. But if it is, perhaps, a different thing to write about paintings than photographs because paintings more clearly record and embody the painter's initiating intention. For all of us "momentenaries,", Los Meninas is never perceived as an actual spontaneous record of "that moment" and however casually ordered Dege's "Pays de la Gravure" (Violette Lipa and His Daughters) may seem, we know he worked to achieve the nonlinearity that gives the four figures in the foreground such independence of each other. We have a visual focus in the arched gate at the rear center, but the figures have no center.
entirely triumphant, it revives—in wholly secular terms—something like the primitive status of images. But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it.

This primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things, but our inclination is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image.

In Modernist aesthetics, within the logic of Seung’s own discourse, the “primitive” is absolutely "erotic," as well because both of them are nonnatural and very hard for our conventional systems to appropriate without appropriating. So “erotic” art would not need and couldn’t be a new kind of language or discursive style. Yet, we have an erotic already, if not exactly in the sense she intends it, in photographs themselves. They are, as she has explained, not information, not certain knowledge, not interpretations which are obvious in their homuncular dimensions. They are difficult to read because they are manipulative as well as visually unnecessary to utilize physically and, therefore, time bound and decaying in every way like your body than your ideas and, as such, if asked to no more be satisfactory. Photographs can love and praise the world in the terms of love and praise that make "the truth" irrelevant.

Writing can’t quite do that, and On Photography itself is not an erotic it is, after all, an essay on photography without any pictures, which has outraged two friends of mine, a painter and a photographer, who do not appreciate Seung’s great discursive sweep, her attempt to do photography, as Derrida has done language, as an ontology itself.

Photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience (people, things, events, whatever we see—albeit differently, often inattentively—with natural vision) and add vast amounts of material that we never see at all. Reality as such is redefined...

Because photographs do the unformidable mystery of depictions.

IV

So, there is nothing more to write or say. What I should do is live Richard Avedon to make a breathtaking portrait of Seung and then give it to her in thanks.

Terry Dodd is a professor of English at Rice University in Houston.

A Collection of True Reports of Life’s Confusions

The Allan Chasanoff Photographic Collection: Tradition And The Unpredictable, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1994. Specially designed box in three parts: 171 8 x 6-inch cards reproducing photographs included in the MFAH exhibition, a pamphlet of writings and essays, and a book reproducing the photographic collection in dustjacket. $75.00

Vicki Goldberg

A textbook may have the right to sound anonymous, but a collection ought to have a frame of mind or a philosophy of life. It should be there behind the choices and omissions

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and yes, photographers are very good at catching generally hidden or overlooked moments.

The catalogue cards can be laid out on a table or floor, compared, grouped, rehashed. The reader (or viewer, or whatever) rather than the photographer, collector, or editor, controls the progression and "story" and dictates any message he or she thinks the data will bear. This represents the coming era, already upon us in one place or another, in which information can be called up and shifted about at will. Already hypertext and children's books on CD-ROM offer more than one story line so the reader can affect the outcome. Back in the sixties, before interactive meant anything outside of sociology, a couple of unpaginated novels were published as loose pages in a box; readers could sequence them in various ways (none of them, apparently, very good literature).

This catalogue, which theoretically gives every viewer the power to construct his or her own version of the collection, is one more tiny step in the movement that is taking the authority, production, and creative initiative out of the hands of the few—the TV networks, film producers, curators—and putting it into the hands of the many. Already personal sale come over the Internet from one rather ordinary household to hundreds, even thousands, of others, and the CD-ROM from London's National Gallery lets anyone with the proper equipment rearrange the collection at will.

Chusovitnoff, who says he is not interested in postmodernist photography, nevertheless considers himself postmodernist by nature; it is just "a movement for the receiver," he says, "not for the producer, not for the artist. It is very democratic." The catalogue is an attempt to endorse a few old-fashioned technologies with some of the freedoms of a newer one. (Actually, this had an earlier existence with loose reproductions for study in art-history courses, but then the freedom remained not from an ideology but a lack of textbooks.)

Unfortunately, information retrieval is still primitive in this form: try finding an image once you've unlocked the card. (At least the book of small images is alphabetized.) And to truly make your own collection you would have to input your own data rather than Chusovitnoff's. Some day soon (not about anyone will be able to do that on a computer, as the copyright laws fly out the window. I'm thinking of sending Chusovitnoff a sign for his door saying: "Things are seldom what they seem."

Vicki Goldberg is a photography critic for The New York Times.
RISKING SINCERITY: Reconciliation And Healing In Contemporary Art

Jennifer Elkins

The neoplastic concept of the artist as physician to the individual and the collective psyche has reemerged at the end of this century as a prophetic message of hope for the future of western culture. This idea, interestingly enough, has risen out of the feminist critique.

Calling for radical changes intended to develop an appropriate paradigm wherein healing the Cartesian split might reunite the body with the mind, the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston recognized the concept's re-emergence and boldly chose to focus the attention of its annual symposium on a conversation among artists willing to address the inherent possibilities of the direct or indirect healing potential of art. Speakers included Karen Finley, performance artist; Eric Avery, artist/physician; Rev. J. Pitman McGhee, Jungian analyst, and director of Houston's Brodax Center; Liz Ward, artist; Roberto Salas, artist/philosopher at University of Houston; James Freed, architect of the Holocaust Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Joseph Havel, artist. In so doing, CAM created an atmosphere wherein the implications of this controversial assertion might become the ground of an ongoing dialogue addressing, as Claire Champ, the director of EDUCAM, expressed it, the healing properties of art as it affects the physical body, the societal body and finally the environmental body.

The theme of the symposium's beginning was clear: that the emphasis of the day was the poetics of the body as the complex metaphor from which the artistic images evolved—nail-bitten bodies, dead bodies, feeling bodies, diseased bodies, ragged bodies, battered bodies, starving bodies, viral bodies, menstrual bodies, and male and female bodies. The body remembers and carries the psychic pain not

only of our own wounding but also those of the generations before us. The artist working out of the body, risking sincerity and embracing vulnerability, brings that pain to consciousness and is able to contextualize the body's memories in her artwork. The archetypal images of this art, then, evoke feelings and responses serving the possibilities of reconciliation and healing. This movement into the body is also a movement into the feminine. For the feminist critique, the body is the objectified status within the patriarchy, disguising it as the seat of feelings and a symbol of weakness, reconstructing it in its primal sexuality and celebrating its mystery, represented by these images were clearly implicated by the chaos, and directed to a mission of healing. Gablik, who was unable to attend the symposium but whose remarks were read to the audience, has described this mission as rising out of a postmodern deconstructionism in harmony with a reconstrutionist philosophy characterized by an emphasis of inner connectedness, social responsibility, and ecological awareness in healing as its most powerful potential. Pamela Pitman McGhee, a Jungian analyst, wrote that is the discipline of depth psychology "permission to bring the chaotic into consciousness is healing." And thus, we heard the artists who are willing to express the human experience rather than stereotype for ego ease and pleasure that which keeps us from facing and experiencing life...the more disorienting the act the more important, for that which pollutes holds nothing but sustains denial." Then quoting another Jungian analyst, James Hillman, he added for "The sin...a reawakening of the soul is experienced." Hillman would have continued. "Souls is always subjective—underground. Art is always subjective, sounding the dissonant chord to whatever goes for "correct" in the day world." Karen Finley, a performance artist tagged by Sen, Jesse Helms as the "Chocolat Woman," was one of the artists whose work was considered in this panel conversation. She spoke of and reacted to the manner in which she believes "women have historically been treated as 'sex' by men." In her piece, "Knock Your Vixens Right," her road enactment of this perceived treatment created for her a place wherein she might experience healing, and therefore justice, because for her "healing is justice." The anger expressed in her work revealed a righteous indignation at the horror of the treatment of feminine values by the patriarch. Finley made no apologies for her anger as she took on the voice of the perpetrator or the victim in a saramphic incantation. She seemed to delight in the unhindered control of her words as her emotions are often denying the dark, repressed, or unrecognized aspects within the self.

Physician and artist Eric Avery, responding to the anguish, "Physician, heal thy self," makes art as it is a result of the personal transformation he experienced as an Amnestic International volunteer in Somalia.

Pitman McGhee's piece in the entrance of the Somali people and reading through it "the way one's way to perform the vio-lent act of feeding hungry children," he abandoned his career because of the distance put between him and the artistic process and those instead did and continues to voice much of his pain and expression. Currently a psychiatry suffering those dying of AIDS, his primitivism reflects a social consciousness speaking from a place not of anger but intense compassion. In Avery's words, "Healing is about transformation, renewing life." His personal psychosomatic disease forces him to confront the changes within his psyche, consequently providing a healing touch in the images he produces.

James Freed, the architect of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., stepped up to the podium and within moments moved the audience into the realm of the sublime with his thoughts on the role of the architectural process. His opening statement made it clear that the connection with the sublime would not come through the transcendental but through a visceral body reaction to the feelings evoked by the experience. Freed began. "Before we talk about healing we must talk about feelings. Feeling is what we have to do to bring an artist's work to a sense of real meaning. In the late 19th-century modern architecture is rethinal but I had to do something physical in this building because the way of the stuff that this building has to be treated through a rational dialogue; but it also must be taught through the feelings of the body." He explained that in order to accomplish this he had subverted the 20th-century logic of working because it was impossible to do a building that was neutral. He described the interior of the museum as a reception, using descriptive words such as zones of transition, symbolic expression, weakened translated into strength, and paradoxical paradoxes. He imagined the architecture as a storyteller, the conveyer of the symbolic message. As he compared the architectural image of modernism and its message of autonomy with this post-modern design that sets forth a new paradigm, a new metaphorology of interconnectedness and inter-subjectivity, relational not autonomous. Thus, he creates a negative window, a linear pane with a glass frame to represent the boarded windows of Auschwitz which were boarded not to keep those on the inside from looking out but to keep those on the outside from seeing what was happening inside. This architectural device created a dialogue. The coherence is derived from a spiritual or physical or non-intellectual way of approaching it.

Crossing the threshold of the Holocaust Museum, one is grounded in the body and connected to it's feelings in order that the sacred space, this site of remembered past as a transcendent experience of escape out of this world and its grotesque realities but instead as a manifestation of the capacity for human relatedness to others through a communion for ourselves, others and the planet itself. These were some of the imaginings of the architects of the site in January. These contain those of those that dare to dream the dreams of another millennium. Gablik would concur as she observed that "Care and compassion are not in question for any of us with the exceptions are all too evident of the lives we are being commanded and idolized by our society, which has been weak in the empathic muscle. Empathy welcomes back the full range of feminine values—feeling. She added, "We do not have the capacity as women to have been virtually driven out of our culture by our patriarchal mentality.

It was apparent to those present at the end of that day that CAM had created a sacred space in risking its own authority by addressing the provocative subject of the poten-tially healing and self-destructive properties of art. It was an response to the feminist critique which has had to violently call forth a para-phrase of the book of the mount. Twenty years having the human species in an evolution of consciousness.

Jennifer Elkins is a writer living in Houston.

FOOTNOTES

Through The Body

Passages from an Unfinished Legacy
by Peter Hite. Houston Center for Photography, January 7-February 20, 1994

Ed Osowski

As I write this review, I am looking at an illustration of Bernini's "The Ecstasy of St. Theresa in Rione's Sta. Maria della Vittoria. What I always notice about Bernini's sculpture is how it combines and compresses religious and sensual ecstasy into one majestic and highly disturbing piece.

Whenever I see the Bernini, I feel as if I have intruded on a very private moment. The saint, her head thrown back, her left arm and leg limp, waits passively, openly, for her lover. Her face records both pleasure and pain. An angel, its face lit by an impish grace, prepares to pierce her with an arrow. To our eyes the saint's ecstasy is physical. In iconographic terms, the angel is Cupid ready to do the work of the pagan god who sent him.

Working within a concrete religious vocabulary, Bernini was a rhetoric highly charged by the theological struggles that animated the Catholic Counter-Reformation. His saint's emotional and physical ecstasy become a visual analogue for the spiritual ecstasy that occurs when divine love pierces her soul—when the believer and God become one—when she receives on her body the stigmata, the wounds where, according to religious traditions, the body of Christ was pierced by nails before his death.

The Baroque vocabulary of Bernini's sculptural piece—the way it struggles to convey a spiritual message through the metaphors of the body—comes to mind in considering Peter Hite's installation of nineteen photographs, "Passages from an Unfinished Legacy." His photographs ostensibly explore the dynamics of father and son relationships, but they do so by alluding indirectly and solely to certain myths, certain events that recall passages from both the Old and New Testament and from the legends of the saints. These are not photographs that "illustrate" biblical scenes such as F. Holland Day's images of the crucifixion. But they are imbued with something approaching religious sensuality as they present scenes from a privately held and practical religion.

Consider Hite's ninth image: His pose and lighting recall images from the Baroque tradition. Hite offers his right hand to his father who firmly holds the arm. Hite's hand pushes awkwardly into his father's chest. Here I am reminded of Bernini: The son's hand is lit dramatically by a beam of light, a beam that also edges the left side of his face. In his pose the son suggests that he himself is about to receive the stigmata. He appears bewildered, confused, a sheep being led to its slaughter, I am about to be sacrificed by his father Abraham. Hite's father, his massive body practically filling the entire image, confronts the viewer directly.

It would be a relatively easy task to read Hite's images autobiographically, as photographs representing various steps along the (male) road to manhood. In his gallery note, Hite encourages one to approach the works in this manner. He writes, "I beg the reader to understand my psychological inheritance I decided to photographically explore the realm of male relationships I have in my family." Hite's image of father, son, and grandfather, their arms linked as they raise over their heads the image of a male ancestor, hints at a private ritual during which a sacred icon or relic is revealed to its worshipers.

But the ambiguities of how generations relate or fail to relate seem the least interesting aspect of Hite's work. His self-portrait in his grandfather's desert, naked, shoulders bent, hemmed in by the old man's suit, preserves the subject as either unwilling or unable to put on his grandfather's clothes and, metaphorically, to accept the life of responsibility and capability, a life that will eventually lead him to be one with his father and grandfather.

The uncertainty of Hite's response to the pressure of his ancestors is better represented by the still image in the exhibition. Originally titled "The Blessing," now, like all other works in the installation, entitled, it places the photographer at the center of the image, naked, his head held tightly, as if in a vice, by two male arms, his father's and grandfather's, pushing against him. The pressure coming from two directions appears enormous. But Hite appears almost serene, almost lost in a trance. What holds one's attention, however, and what makes the photograph from being merely "illuminative," are the men's wrist-watches. They "date" the image, plant it firmly in the present, and provide the viewer with clues in what would otherwise have been a photograph with nothing to anchor it in the present.

Hite's nakedness, finally, separates him from the other two men. Never do we see them stripped below their waists. But Hite appears fully undressed in a number of the images. On a symbolic level, it is absolutely appropriate that his vulnerability before these two figures of male authority be shown in this manner. Nakedness can be the great leveller, it removes all pretense. In Hite's pantaloon universe, the son has not yet won the right to wear clothing.

In five of the photographs Hite foreshadows, maneuvers, and manipulates his father's head. What private ritual, one asks, is he being engaged here? What scene, one wonders, better left private is being made public? These are disturbing images because their narrative scheme is so deliberately jarring. As Hite pushes on his father's head, he holds the head against a table, and, then, as he caresses the head, one senses a transference of power. What one also senses is how these photographs call to mind Salome's erotic request for the head of John the Baptist.

Hite's images explore, with an ambiguity that seems quiet, the area where the spiritual and the psychological combine. The sexually-charged nature of so many of his images returns us to Bernini's sculpture. Hite's photographs frame a central belief of Christian theology—that one comes to God through the body. Hite shows his sensitivity to the belief that the body functions as metaphoric territory on which spiritual and psychological sagas are enacted, depicted, and repeated.

Hite's photographs teem and exude, refuse to reveal their meanings, are indirect and, are unforgettable. His knowledge of and use of traditions of Baroque religious painting—arranging the subjects in highly dramatic situations, lighting them with care and deliberation, posing them oddly—are the tools he uses to hint at the meanings of his images.

Ed Osowski is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and his reviews appear regularly in the Houston Post.
MISS TOT

HER NAME IS ALMUTER but people call her Tot, Miss Tot, or Tee Tot. Her brothers call her Lonnie. She also has a succession of surnames: McKinnin, Lofoton, Cole, the last two the names of husband's, a subject on which she is vague.

Miss Tot is not versed in matters of the Constitution but she has an inborn sense of her right to privacy. She did allow that the most recent husband "got the hot feet." If she once harbored hard feelings about his departure, she doesn't now.

She keeps a photograph of him, hanging high on the wall near the ceiling. You have to climb on a chair to look at him. He was good-looking and slight—a bantamweight—which suggests he probably was quick and light on his feet. In the photograph, he leans in a jaunty pose against a fine, shiny car.

Tot herself is small and agile. Black people never look as old as they are. Tot is seventy-four. It's not so much that she looks fifteen or twenty years younger than her real age but that she looks ageless. This does not mean she has led a life of leisure or that she has not been sick or near the point of death.

She was born and raised in the Hills, the rolling, wooded section of Mississippi to the east of the Delta. She came here in 1937, with her two boys but without Lofoton, her first husband. She lives in a tenant's shack at the bend of a gravel road that snakes from Highway 61 off toward the backwaters of the Mississippi. Her house is in Tunica County, up in the north end of the Delta. Tunica County is a case of poverty raised to a higher power. In the poorest region of the country, it is the poorest county. Roughly 7,000 people live in Tunica County—the population continues to dwindle—80 percent of them black. The white minority of Tunica County is particularly offensive on the subject of poverty.

There are fewer and fewer shacks like Tot's lining Delta roads. With the mass migration began during World War I, of rural blacks from the South to urban centers of the North, their abodes, hardly built for the ages, have fallen down, enveloped by vines, razed, or burned. Scattered around the Delta you can see squarish piles of rubble and blackened earth that have an eerie resemblance to the docks left by the rockets of departing spaceships. Tot lives here with her two sons, whose names are William Henry but who go by Jim or Jim Tot. Her other son lives with his family in Texas. The house and yard are tidy and decorative, though its flaws—like the plastic pelican in the front yard—and the accretion of reasons for poverty value as outlandish and cluttered by the standards of white suburban America. In the back is a hen house, a bin for collecting aluminum cans (the earnings go to support her church), a woodpile, a shed, an old Thunderbird rusting next to a now abandoned sky-blue shotgun bench. Tot's vegetable garden fought against the chickens by a crude fence.

This island of domesticity sits in a sea of cultivation. The field to the east has just been leveled and compacted for the cultivation of rice. It is so flat and packed that it looks like a parking lot. No trees obstruct the view. You can sit on her porch and watch two fixed cars and trucks plying Highway 61 half a mile away.

This is the center of Tot's universe. She knows the site of every pecan tree in a five-mile radius. She collects the nuts in the fall to sell. Her church, which she organized and maintains, is a quarter mile up the road. She is a samaritan, caring for the sick and afflicted in the vicinity. News consists of local events—a Mexican migrant worker shot by a black fellow; a couple suffocated by a leaky gas stove—and she is a proficient bearer of the news she deems important. On the other hand, she has no opinion on the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court because she has never heard of him. The most important vote she casts is for road commissioner because that is the person who keeps her gravel road in passable condition. Though she is a beneficiary of the achievements of Civil Rights worker Erannie Lou Hamer, who was born and died forty miles away, Tot does not recognize the name. "Was she a church lady?" she wonders.

The only document she seems capable of or interested in reading is the Bible. There is a Bible on the dashboard of her car. Bibles lie open on several of the beds in her house, and on the window sill behind the dilapidated couch on her screened-in back porch.

WHAT IS THE DELTA?

THE DELTA IS A GEOLOGICAL MINERVIS. It is an alluvial plain, not a delta, ten thousand years of sand and silt and detritus carried in the deep waters of the Mississippi and finally dropped by the river; for lack of energy, into a huge, ancient, gaping embayment, with its rivals about where Cairo, Illinois, stands today and its mouth puckered up against the Gulf of Mexico, down around New Orleans. It's raw filled in with dirt of the richest sort. Starting slowly in the early years of the nineteenth century and accelerating after the Civil War, settlers began to unravel the spectacular cape of vegetation—a weave of canebrakes and briars and towering bottomland forests—that covered the alluvial plain. They farmed; their successors are still farming.

Despite a flawed application of nomenclature, in a textbook sense the Delta is a great continental discharge of dirt stretching from Cairo to New Orleans. But in an idiomatic, sociological sense, when most people talk about the Delta, they are referring to the bottom of this larger terrain. In the minds of most people who live in these parts or who have had occasion to visit or to think much about it, the Delta is that upturned, outstretched hand of land that stretches from Memphis to Vicksburg. Here, everything that is problematic and wonderful about the larger terrain is amplified. Some of the most harrowing and courageous events of the Civil Rights Movement took place here, but segregation remained the tactic rule. The soil is rich here but the poverty the deepest, and here is where poverty is a conspicuous emblem of one race. From here, the poorest place in America, came the blues.
NO MEN

Mississippi Delta

ground by Keith Carter and Suzanne Winckler. Designed to document the life of Jean Lange-Paul Taylor Prize of the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, religion and folkloric belief of the area's people, accompanied and completed by and funded by the Texas Commission on the Arts, the work was exhibited

THE CHURCH SIT ON A BACK ROAD. It was white. On the horizon it glowed like an oracle; up close it was flimsy, a miscellany of scavenged materials. Its inanimate pastor, who was also a farmer and carpenter, reported that he had spied some lumber at the demolition of a building that would serve to add a window onto the church. If it was alright with the congregation, he could secure the materials at a bargain price.

The congregation, meeting as always on the fourth Sunday of every month, was composed of black women. They ranged in age from about ten to seventy-five. The older women, reared in a sedated generation, were dressed in dark, matronly suits and dresses, near her worn. Some were wise; a few wore hats. The mother of the church—the woman in charge of church business—wore a white nurse's uniform, the standard apparel of church mothers. The young women wore bright clothes with short hemlines. Three of these young women, sisters, sat together on one pew. One of them carried an infant boy in her arms. During the service, they passed him back and forth like a gift. Her two sisters were pregnant.

The sermon came from Matthew 20, the first sixteen verses, an inescapable text about labor and wages in God's vineyard. The thirteenth verse is a passage that would be familiar even to people who don't read the Bible: "So the last shall be first, and the first last. For many be called, but few chosen."

The preacher worked himself into a frenzy. He threw back his head and closed his eyes. He took deeper and deeper inhalations as he talked, which caused the air to rattle as it rushed down his windpipe.

"So the last shall be first, and the first last. Many be called, but few chosen. Now think about that verse. Let me make you a parable what I'm saying. Just look how many in church today and every thing I see is two men I believe that is in this house right now."

He was referring to himself and the infant boy.

"Everybody else is ladies. And I know that in this little town and where I live there is no more men walkin' around then gettin' in the church of God. But I'm saying to the ladies just hold out to the end. You got a crown in waitin' for God. But where the men gonna be when the Lord call the roll?"

The congregation replied, "Amen, amen, amen, amen."

SHEP

IN THE LATE 1960S FARMERS IN THE DELTA, like many other farmers across America, began picking up professional velocity, clearing and draining more land to put into production in a chivalrous, bulk-leveraged, government-subsidized effort to feed and clothe the world. In the Delta in particular, where the top soil is so deep that the sacrifice of some could be countered, the dirt has to fly. More precisely, the practice of land leveling escalated. Billiard-table-flat land is desirable for a number of reasons: for one, it promotes more efficient drainage of water. But levelling stains the history off the land.

The Delta has a long tradition of being not too uncommonplace a place to eke out an existence. People have made themselves at home on this fertile alluvial plain for at least ten thousand years. They have left ample sign of their presence. In an effort to salvage some fragments of the Delta's history before the farmers scraped it all away, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History opened a branch office in Clarksdale, up in the north end of the Delta.

On Second Street, in a dingy, flat-roofed, fifty-er office, itself an artifact of a more prosperous time, thousands of unearthed specimens sit in closets, storerooms, under tables, and in the hallway. There are potsherds, projectile points, hoes, awls, axes, celts, benders, ear plugs, pendannets, and effigies. They were gathered up, classified, catalogued, and are now brooded over by John Conaway, state archaeologist, whose intense concentration on the details of prehistory may in some way explain the holes in the heels of his shoes. It is his job to save every scrap of evidence from the lives of the long dead, including the bones of their dogs. Conaway takes more than an academic interest in dogs. He has labeled his house Sheep, Bowser, Spot, Sam. When he takes one of these cardboard sarcophagi off the shelf, its contents rattle like a maraca.

Conaway doesn't have a dog of his own—he wouldn't want to leave it in the apartment he is seldom in himself—but he has found his niche in the dog-human continuum. When he is out on a dig, often a lonely pursuit, he befriends the local Delta mongrels, foregoing their native skittishness, they trot over to where he is digging, curl up, and nap while he sifts through the ancient soil.

EGGS

THE WOMAN WHO RAISES EGGS TO SELL guards her hens against vandals. "I came home one day; dog had chickens scattered from the yard out in the field," she said. The woman told the neighbor children to help her catch the dog. Later, they fetched her to the culprits' hiding place.

"I got a rope and I went down there. I put that rope around that dog's neck and I tied it to the back of my car. The children wanted to ride with me. I said I don't care. We got on down the road. They said, 'Miss Ten, that dog ain't dead.' I said, 'Y'all don't need to worry. He be dead when I cross 6th highway.'"

Suzanne Winckler is a writer based in Nebraska.

Keith Carter, Analyssa, 1991

Keith Carter, Dog and Coffin, 1992

Keith Carter, Winter, 1991

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS:

Daniel P. Younger

In recalling the 1992 Los Angeles riots, images of fiery devastation are among those that are apt to come to mind. Viewers gathering the news from the mainstream media (in particular, network TV and illustrated news magazines such as Newsweek and Time) might tend to associate the riots with California's wildfire of 1993 and earthquake of 1994, not simply because they all occurred in the same city, but because images of fire predominated in the media coverage of all three events. On some level, the visuality of these events different as they are, is modulated. In the midst of the series of wildfires that claimed lives and property in Los Angeles in the fall of 1993, Carolyn See, a California-based novelist, acknowledged that people lose the sense of terror and clarity in a great fire. Indeed, however inappropriate it may have seemed at the time, the press reported that certain victims of the fires who had suffered the partial or complete loss of their homes went so far as to say that their loss had been mitigated by the opportunity to immolate themselves in the sheer danger and magnitude of the blaze. Initial broadcast and print media coverage of recent Los Angeles calamities (including the riots, the wildfires, and most recently, the earthquake) all exploited an unhidden fascination with the spectacle of fire.

As circumstantially different as those events were, what television screens reporting on those tragedies seemed to share most was a familiar trope of "disaster TV": raging fires in progress that promised to consume whatever stood in their path. With programming that brought a succession of fires—each one distinguished from the next—into U.S. living rooms, many networks offered extended coverage of these tragedies. Lending continuity to the studio coverage of news events, generic icons projected behind anchor personas are often employed by news programs to cue viewers to topics under discussion (a bandana, for example might accompany a story on inner-city gun violence). During the week, the networks reinforced this in their viewership through the instantaneous production and repeated appearance of icons that depicted raging fires, building damage, or firefighters.

At the same time, news magazines presented bold, tablelike headlines superimposed on splash photography of fires and devastation—tied to the edges of indexes and ordering pages (a number of these folded out). The result of this journalism treatment was a kind of "monumentization" of catastrophe—usually with an emphasis on visual effects and matériel damage rather than human loss. Though such sensational reportage is hardly new, this tabloid treatment has been introduced increasingly in recent years in ostensibly middle-brow, non-tabloid venues. While it may seem an exaggeration to suggest that the disparate disasters besetting California were defined by nothing so much as TV screens and magazine pages interspersed with the familiar orange hue of fires burning out of control, this was precisely what the media offered (and chiefly what viewers saw)—a result of the media's easy agreement in satisfying its audience's appetite for spectacle.

To frame the surge of interest in the Los Angeles riots, these pictures amounted to little more than the temporal effect—rather than the cause—of events of considerable social consequence. I would argue that such screen coverage functioned as a way to structure, middle and lower-class consumers (the primary demographic group targeted by mainstream news magazines and network TV news programs), contributed to a national loss of memory (in many quarters) and a relativized and acutely apparent to the root causes and long-term effects of the Los Angeles riots. Among those who have remarked on this case of amnesia is Carroll Water, a foremost African-American intellect at Princeton. In his recent book Race Matters, he offers the most acute assessment of the social and racial causes and effect of the riots missing from most media reportage:

A journalist writing shortly after the Los Angeles riots in 1992, briefly summed up the contentious relationship between the media and news events: "a fire needs oxygen." By suggesting that the running newsflow of television cameras may have spurred the riot in South Central L.A., the writer confirmed the media's keen pursuit of the sensational. In the era before television, early photos and news films that qualified as some of the first possessing news value—commonly depicted scenes of tragedies like the L.A. riots on their anniversaries. There is a fascination in the superficial contrast drawn between the "fire" and after images. Implicit in this exercise is the fact that what the public remembers (and probably understands) in this post-weeks and months following a disaster, is not what life was like before an event or even immediately following it, but the spectacle of the news media.

The public's memory is affected both by the impact of astonishing images, yet they tend to flow in the mind in a rather discontinuous state. Common or public experience (that shared societally regardless of ultimate differences in perception or conclusion) is purified via the writers, the visual, and the world. Of these three, it is arguably the visual at this moment in the late twentieth-century that is the most standardized and committed to memory. And (postmodernism notwithstanding) it is the visual that viewers that attract the media's most continuous attention as the most important and "objective" element of news production. As TV audiences viewed the configuration of Los Angeles in 1992, generally missing were the accompanying sounds of raging flames, explosions, shelters, glass, gnawing, screams, and the smell that attracted the media's fascination.

"In so far as we might expect from the technology of television, and what, in fact, characterized television news in its infancy—" we were left with the arbitrary and arguably dispensable "noise" of studio commentary. Such sensory narration, while intended to color initial reading and perception, would appear to be superfluous in the recital of special events.

Unarticulated images of buildings engulfed in flames and of human looters dominate our memory of the riots. It has been argued by Andrew P. Kaufman that the news media's visual images like these tend to degrade, in memory, to little more than pure spectacle itself.

In the coverage of the riots, television offered few images depicting social conditions in South Central Los Angeles, and little sense of the despair (or dignity) of affected communities. The emotional core of the riot "...within weeks, and before a single scooped mini-mall had actually been rebuilt, the second Los Angeles riot, as well as the national urban-rural crisis that it symbolized,"

FREE TIME

November 8, 1993. 8:30

Fighting the California Firestorm

*"Fresno," Newsweek cover, November 8, 1993 (Photo by Michael Schamm--Julia)
have become synonymous; the media and its audience have come to "idealize any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence." Rather than informing or as positive, the media tends to engage the viewer in a flat, one-dimensional experience, leading to in the fantastic, in brief, dazzling images for their own sake—results in an implosion of information: pure effect lacking context or meaning, according to Baardrud. In retrospect, the commodification of spectacle in Los Angeles seems to be a textbook case of a wide-homeric media condition implied by Garson's and Mclaren's question. Cover stories that appeared in Time and Newsweek were titled respectively, "The Fire This Time!" and "Fire and Fury." "The Fire This Time!" was a clear (and curious) appropriation of the title of James Baldwin's 1963 books, The Fire Next Time. Baldwin, in The Fire Next Time, explicated the despair of the American black, identified and indicated the intransigence of the (white) American power structure, and promised racial apocalypse. Time signaled its view of the fakeness of the L.A. riots in its ironic use of Baldwin's title. The appropriation of the title recalled the racial unrest of the 1960's that followed the publication of The Fire Next Time, and sharply suggested the ineffectuality of the Civil Rights Movement and Baldwin's seminal literary contribution to it. Soaked out and surrounded by blazing fires, the African-American youths depicted on the opening pages of Time and on the cover of Newsweek are seen to act largely alone. Implicated, now: (participants in a mob) do not act alone; they possess agency—a quality these isolated youths appear to lack. Given the graphic prominence of the fires and their proximity to the youth, a kind of symbolic relationship between the figures and the fires is suggested in these images. Consequently, a relationship may be drawn between the spectacle and stimuli of the fires, and that of these teenagers—representatives of the young, black urban underclass.

Dawn Guernsey's 1992 "Men in Suits" is among a series of works by the artist that presents a sympathetic, multi-ethnic representation of urban dwellers coping with the destruction of their neighborhoods. In contrast, media coverage of the L.A. riots overlooked the plight of victims of affected communities and glossed their ethnic diversity. More recently, Bernard W. Kirsy, who succeeded Uehroder as the cochairman of the beleaguered riot recovery effort, stepped down last January. And in the fall 1993 mayoral election, residents of Los Angeles, reflecting an apparent white backlash, elected conservative Richard Riordan. Supported by Ronald Reagan, Riordan, a wealthy venture capitalist, was the first Republican elected mayor of L.A. in 36 years. Criticized for his lack of support for the rebuilding of neighborhoods ravaged by the riots, he made crime the centerpiece of his campaign, vowing to expand the LAPD by forty percent. Writing on local L.A. media in Inside the L.A. Riots, Doug Ireland noted:

"...the night of the worst violence, there was a near total absence of voices from the affected communities... Los Angeles television just kept pouring raw footage from remote units onto the screen. Anchors everywhere plied field reporters with Big Picture questions. But that wasn't their job. Their job was to create a mythical city, a sort of Beirut West, views of which would keep viewers frozen in fear..."

And, similarly, Tom Carson, writing also in Inside the L.A. Riots, stated that the rioters themselves remained "virtual strangers on TV with not only their motives but their specific actions all but impossible to get a handle on." One became witness to "endless channel-clicking footage of one fire after another hiding the sky." These critical observers of the media treatment of the tragedy of the L.A. riot stress to the effective abstraction and neutralization of the social, a process analyzed by Baardrud. In an age when information and entertainment the passive absorption of terrifying images that resist an active processing of meaning. Trapped within the slick TV packaging of on-the-scene kinetic images like those broadcast from Los Angeles, the viewer found it impossible to fashion the social cause and effect residing beneath flames engulfing the screen."

The youths in Time and Newsweek appear with open mouths to be shouting and strike aggressive postures, their eyes screwed up high, their head that reads, "We Will Not Retire," the other gestures threateningly. Race and blame are stigmatized in these iconic images that purported to
In the current climate, pathology is truth and truth is pathology.

The appeal of these images, rooted in the stasis-qua-racism of the 1990s, resides in their ability to frighten, and ultimately (like the fires) to embody an essence of social context, consequence, and action.
Creating An Art Form

Alex: The Life of Alexander Liberman.
By Dodie Kazanjian and Calvin Tomkins.
Alfred A. Knopf. 1993. 385 pp. $27.50

Holly Hilbrand

For Alexander Liberman, photography was not an art form. Yet he felt for it and felt for it transformed the pages of Vogue and other magazines, and his own photographs led to the development and appreciation of his painting and sculpture.

Still alive at eighty-one, Liberman only this spring left his position as editorial director of all Condé Nast publications, a post he held for thirty-two years and which is one of the most influential in the magazine world. He is now deputy chairman for editorial matters, an exalted position that must have seemed far from Liberman's grasp in 1941 when, as a recently arrived Russian refugee, he was fired after a week of working in Vogue's art department.

How Liberman turned an employment defeat into editorial victory makes for a fascinating look at the poetic changes in American magazine journalism. No less interesting is his life story, told in great detail but not always with much eagerness by Dodie Kazanjian, a Vogue writer, and Calvin Tomkins, a contributor to The New Yorker and the author of, among other books, Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They begin the story vividly, with a smarmy description of Liberman's 80th birthday party, that reads:

"In 1977, second to Tatiana, the Countess du Plonx, the Russian niece of one of Liberman's early artistic influences, lasted for fifty years. When France was occupied, the couple fled to New York. His connections to editors in France helped land him a job at Vogue, where, despite his initial failure, quickly won the admiration of founder Condé Nast and rose to the position of art director within two years. Early on Liberman spotted the talents of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon; he was able to hire Penn, but Avedon, who joined the rival Harper's Bazaar, shocked him for years."

With Penn, Liberman established the closest and most successful relationship of his professional life. Penn himself acknowledged his debt to Liberman: "Some of the best work for Vogue, though it may bear my signature in fact, are the results of a special and close collaboration," he wrote in 1991. Penn's first works for Vogue were still-life photographs, meticulously arranged objects made modern with jarring, discordant notes. This sense of imperfection was what Liberman was looking for, especially in the presentation of the magazine's fashion models. Rejecting the ideal of "vision of blondes" with women posed as ineluctable beings, Liberman sought the "real garment of a real person," which Penn was able to provide—at first by accident, in a shot of model Jean Patchett in Paris—that inspired many other cover photographs.

Part of Liberman's approach to photography at Vogue was what he called "anti-design." He saw an obsession with design at the magazine—with "the use of the material more important than the material itself"—that he wanted to break with a more "journalistic" approach—rougher lettering, no white space, crowded pages, messier layouts. And although Liberman worked with such fine photographers as Penn, Cecil Beaton and Horst, he showed no interest in publishing print portfolios even Penn's non-fashion work was presented in Vogue as an edited form of illustration. Even so, they are only a part of his tale. The rest lies in the striking and extensive portfolio of the photographs he encouraged, even prodled, to greatness the poses of fashion models pulled down off the postcards and into the streets and restaurants of a more workerly glamour, the magazine that helped change and create, from Vogue to Vanity Fair."

Hilbrand's conclusion, which is richly illustrated, is that Liberman is a man with a vision of what he wants to do and a willingness to employ the best talent to realize it. Liberman's success is not only a matter of fine taste but also of vision and determination.

In the middle of all this stands Liberman, calm and serene in his English-tailored suit, an artist who somehow managed to keep the loyalty of his staff even while adding them to rip up layouts at the last minute in order to "enrich" the designs and art that were a work in progress but whose ambitions were tortured by self-doubt. Irony and the force of fortune are never far from his story. He was an art director who believed in "anti-design" and an editor who viewed photography as a form of "documentation" but collaborated on some of his great images: a man who disliked being known as "the man who has everything," praised Lincoln's achievements in a surprising sermon about becoming an artist while heed- ing his messages simultaneously.

Born in Russia, he was the only son of a parity of Russian and Polish women with artistic pretensions and a showy businessman who figured in Lenin's government. Liberman's first marriage, to a "bald-headed goddess" named Hilde Stumm, ended quickly in divorce, but a

In 1948 he used the camera to capture the work of the world's great artists. During the summers, Liberman, starting with Georges Braque, began photographing renowned artists and their studios. He wrote out the studio of Cezanne, preserved if as his own was still living, and when Penn saw Liberman's photographs of it, he urged his mentor to think of photography as a "useful profession." Liberman considered for a time the idea of a "useful" activity. In the trances of his life he is the man who did not regard photography as an art but found instead that his first recognition as an artist with an exhibit of "The Artists in His Studio" project at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959. A year later, the photographs were published by Vogue Press.

But Liberman had also been working on other projects: paintings of minimalist circles, an obsession of his since 1959, were first shown in 1960. The success of "The Artists in His Studio" led to the exhibit, and the circle motif continued in Liberman's painting until 1964, when he began to experiment with freshened splashes and broad streaks of color.

But Liberman did not stop with photographs and paintings. A career in sculpture was his too—he became one of the most successful public artists of his time with his mastery of large-scale works. Liberman even had the distinction of seeing one of his works, Adam, ordered removed by the Nixon White House. (Inside sources pinned the request on H.R. Haldeman.) The work had been on permanent loan to the Corcoran Gallery of Art and visible from the White House when the National Park Service carried it off. It was later rescued by an art center in New York state.

Several examples of Liberman's sculpture and paintings are presented in the book, which is illustrated with eight-color photographs ranging from family snapshots to portraits of the artist (see Penn in Liberman's own photographs, including

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
Where the Boys Are

Stranger Than Fiction by Jim Stone


Daniel P. Younger

With his novelist's dress jacket and cut-away tuxedo, Stranger Than Fiction by Jim Stone resembles a personal scrapbook, a shorthand record of the photographer's predilections. He has created a kind of artist's book; interspersing photographs with pages of newspaper recounting peculiar tidbits, most of the small-town variety. Stone's black-and-white Polaroid Type 55 and medium format photographs taken in the United States and Eastern Europe are carefully printed in diagrammatic, one-to-a-page, including several fold-out pages that allow for multiple pairings of text and image.

Stone is a photographer—an invertebrate collector of sorts—in search of offbeat individuals who emerge as heroes of individuality within their own cultural microcosms. He takes as his subject matter those who run against the pack, who identify themselves proudly by their passions—curious passions, avocations, possessions and domiciles. Recording his subjects and their material traces across the world in intimate and companionable fashion, they become not a gallery of oddities, but possessors of a sort of eccentric folksong spirit. With something of the alternately whimsical and bizarre in many of Stone's images, he has sought to correct a counter-part in words to his pictures. He couples his avid act of collecting as a photographer with an apparent interest in tabloid-like reportage of the unusual and/or violent human behavior. Stranger Than Fiction weaves together photographs and odd narratives that include acts or incidents such as indecent exposure, the explosion of a menu sign in the drive-through lane of a fast food chain, the sentencing of a penis (one John Wayne Bobbit's), submarine sandwiches found stuffed with marijuana, the microwaving of animals, a French accent obtained inexplicably as a result of an auto accident, and a bank teller held up for mere loonies by a boy. While most of the tales selected as examples thus far might be categorized as unusual, ribald, cruel, or criminal, the most consistent strain in the newspaper clippings that Stone collects are incidents even more socially regressive and destructive, relating to gun use, accidental and intentional homicide, and suicide. Such incidents include: a teacher who finally crushed the head of a student in a school gate for truancy, a son who shot and killed his father (a policeman) as a result of being punished for bad grades, a high school student charged in the hacking and shooting death of his mother who was nevertheless inducted into his community's Youth Hall of Fame.

Although murder and manslaughter may be somewhat more concentrated in the initial newspaper pages of the book, I didn't detect a deliberate scheme in the author's sequence of the varying genres of tall tales. Nor with the exceptions of some obvious alliances between text and photography does a necessary overall pattern emerge in the relations between text and image. With this in mind—banishing any unyielding adversarial codes and possible myopia on my part—I would hazard a few initial conclusions about Stone's act of combining text and photographs. He profilers few clues but the books's title and the 1974 statement by Garry Winogrand prefacing the book: "There is nothing as mysterious as a fact clearly described." With the book, based upon, then upon the maxim "truth is stranger than fiction," and Winogrand's training about the photographic medium, one could more than quibble with the implication that photography—"the selectivity—the selectivity—in this photographer's choice and sequence of subject matter and news stories. Stone's choices are not given candidly "the world out there," but embody bias and cultural significance, making them integral to the project and its meaning. Stranger Than Fiction bears for illustrative analysis, especially the first one. If, as I've already suggested, the stories themselves don't at first suggest any particular patterns—but rather slip into their settings with mishaps, cruelty, violence, and death—the photographs (in concert with the stories) seem to provide a framework.

As presented in his book, Stone's world is overwhelmingly male. With the exception of a large audience of middle-aged men and women seated at a "Military Appreciation Day" ceremony serving as the primary subject of one photograph and a few pictures of girls, adult females—delineated as primary or prominent subjects—appear in only four pictures of thirty-three depicting human subjects. Roughly twenty pictures capture photographs of women, and twenty-one portray men with varieties of possessions—four of them with guns. Only four images depict men and women together. As many as thirteen of the photographs picture men as lone agents. Of the eleven photographs in the book that do not depict people, eight either picture weapons or in some way reference armed conflict. A clear majority of the protagonists of the newspaper stories reproduced in Stranger Than Fiction are also male. Against the backdrop of this statistically male universe, Stone foregrounds the book with an interesting photograph of a young, pregnant woman, Barbara, Pregnant: Dorchester, Massachusetts. The subject, wearing a maternity dress, sits barefoot in a lawn chair facing the camera with her legs spread over the edge of a plastic children's pool (resembling a woman's uterus) filled with water. This focused photograph is reminiscent of a snapshot genre in which monotonously picture their girlfriends or wives of childish things in or near bodies of water. This image obtains an unmissable hierarchy and importance in the book, given the priority of its placement—in (reverse) relation to its distinct minority status. Much of the rest of the book (the news stories especially) seems to be deliberate construction to lay emphasis upon this iconography (I would argue, visualized) female image—a largely made society engaged in surprise, fear, or other socially unacceptable behavior.

Directly opposite Barbara Pregnant, and on the following two pages, are two dried newspaper articles. The first is a story about a man wearing a diaper who publicly filled a length of golden hose with whipped cream and a couple who attempted to trade in their four-month-old son for a late model Corvette. Shipping to the middle section of the book, Stone assembles several newspaper clippings that together portray men in size, power, and for powerless and misdirected; two elderly men shoot it out in old-West style but miss each other entirely; a right-wing Young Republican group is forced to cancel a turkey shoot in which they planned to use a phoo of Bill Clinton as a target; and two men with a shotgun force their way into their home of a couple and throw a axe at a woman. These stories are followed by a portrait of a young soldier—Private Tkaduki, drunk and AWOL—sitting idly in front of a statue of Lenin in Poland. Finally keeping in mind the opening photographs—Barbara, Pregnant—and its symbolic significance and force, in the next-to-last image in the book, a group of Pakistani men surround a father solemnly holding the corpse of his daughter who was killed when their mud house collapsed. Not improbably, Stone closes the book with a lyric excerpt from a classic by the 1960s band, The Animals: "Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood.

The complex meanings and associations issuing from Stranger Than Fiction are mediatic, both within and beyond the ken of the author. If Stone's book points a frequently dangerous, male-dominated world, in gas-wielding purveyors of domestic and global violence suffer social paralysis and lack authority, power, and will. The book's narrative suggests, among other things, themes such as male identification and social-sexual dysfunction, concern for the fecility and responsibility of home and child-rearing, and (not the least) an overriding passion for popular male symbols of instrumentality—cars and guns. Keeping these conclusions and my earlier statistical analysis of gender in mind, I would argue that Stranger Than Fiction suggests, an acute bifurcation of the sexes, one that is well-documented in popular culture. The at once pronounced hierarchy and isolation of the image, Barbara Pregnant, seems founded on the essentialist and long-sustained construction of women as biologically different—the familiar biology-as-desirability argument. Women assume such positionality in relation to the actual and instrumental separation from men. In Stranger Than Fiction, Jim Stone constructs a fragile, foiled world bound by both truth and fiction. His contribution seems as much as anything, finally, a desperate plea that we might countenance the unsettling particulars of an isolated and untenable male culture. At the same time, it is challenging to write about and to manage fully into society.
Lifting Albania’s Darkness

Albania Opens the Door: Life after Hoxha by Martha Greon, Pen-Jac Gallery, Austin, TX, March 5–30, 1994

Karen E. Lillis

When I was a student at Pratt Institute, photographer Phil Perkins told me, “There’s no place that photography hasn’t been. Photography has gone from the far reaches of the globe to the inside of the human body. There is nothing new to be shown in the sense that this should not be a prime motivation for tackling a photographic subject.”

I recall these words as I took in Martha Greon’s exhibition and I mentally made an exception to his wisdom. For while he may be correct in a stricter sense, Greon also reminds us of the vital role of the photographer to inform the public in the face of ever-changing world politics. Albania must indeed have been photographed before, but only recently as a new democratic state freed from its twenty-five-year Alphabetic government. Greon shot the first of these photographs in 1992. The remainder were taken during a longer stay in Albania in the fall of 1993. The images exhibit a ground allowed, reflecting both her actual travels across the land and the range of issues approached. She shows us a boy standing next to a chimney stack in Shkodër; a Gypsy Vendor in Prizren selling her wares; Mauks from Pristina; and a group of Albanians being stripped of their clothes in Tirana. The variety of the subjects succeeded without sacrificing the scenes’ unity. Each photograph offers a chance to learn more about this long-isolated nation. Greon interspersed informational captions throughout the show. Hursh is Ener Hoxha, the leader who began inciting Albanians with his violently anti-religious platforms in 1964, and whose atheistic regime began in 1967. His death in 1985 was not the end of the regime, as a power struggle ensued. Today no public likenesses of Hoxha remain, and all the existing red stars are now being removed from public places.

Just as Greon took the opportunity to seek out and photograph this country which was closed to outsiders before 1991, the Albanians she encountered appeared equally eager to observe her—it is interesting to note that so many of her human subjects returned her camera’s gaze. As she poignantly captured human interaction—among political officials, families, school-age friends—in front of her camera, she often harnessed a significant energy between herself and her subjects. In Changing Sleep, Gjirokastra, three boys occupy a small but central space in the photograph. The very young boy on the left hides coyly behind his friend, who in turn looks and smiles at the photographer, giddy to be chosen by the camera. The boy to his right is several years older, and though he does not recognize the camera with his gaze, he poses toughly, leaning his arm against a nearby tree in performative bravado. In Academy and 146th (Stavrido Hospital), two men, one with a bandaged hand, tenderly hold onto each other while gently smiling at the photographer. Greon confirmed in an interview that her Albanian subjects were receptive to being photographed: “Many people begged me to take their picture—they would come over and pose in front of my camera.”

The exhibition is far from a definitive study of the daily lives of Albanians, but it does not pretend to be. What Greon captured, and what Albania seemed to offer, was a wide-eyed curiosity from its citizens as it re-emerges as a globally-oriented world. Greon was less interested in scrutinizing this country than discovering it. She was willing to let Albania approach her as she was eager to capture on film this newly-accessible nation. In one group of four photos—inned together—a group of Greeks-Albanians is depicted after a demonstration for their rights as a struggling minority in a formerly communal economy which now disputes ownership of land. The police retaliated with violence, and in three of the photographs, individuals willingly bare their skin to show their bruises. The openness of the people in these photographs could be an indication of the rapport she established with her subjects. But it also symbolized an essential aspect of the Albanian awakening—incorporating a people’s curiosity toward an entire world that had been kept from them, a bewilderment at newfound freedoms, and at times, a flirt of remaining powerfulness despite new political developments. According to Greon, “There were some people who did not want their picture taken—this country was coming out of a deep paranoia.”

Exhibitions

Songs of My People

Songs of My People, on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, August 28–November 20, 1994, is an exhibition of 150 photographs by 53 prominent African American photographers, including four Pulitzer Prize winners, that capture the experiences and diversity of African Americans and their contributions to American culture. Six works by Houston photographers Genny Broadnax and Morris Richardson are featured. Photographers/filmmaker Gordon Parks will give a lecture on the exhibition on Thursday, August 23, at 7pm. Tickets are $5.60. Genny Broadnax will give an artist’s tour of the exhibition on Thursday, November 3, at 7pm. Call the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston at (713) 639-7300 for further information regarding these and other events related to the exhibition.

The exhibition was organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and developed for circulation by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The Houston exhibition is curated by Anne Wilkes Tucker, Gas and Lyndall Wortham curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Exhibition Preview

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SPE Regional Conference

NOVEMBER 10-12, 1994

PEDRO MEYER
One of Mexico’s premier contemporary photographers, Pedro Meyer, will give the keynote address on Thursday night.

South Central Regional Conference of the Society for Photographic Education

KEITH CARTER
Presentations on Friday will include:
- Keith Carter (Baton Rouge, LO)
- Carter has an extensive record of exhibitions, including: On Higher Ground: Photographs of the Mississippi River Delta, recently being traveled by HCP. Two new books published the past year: monographs of Carter’s work. From Houston to Baton, Rice University Press published the first book, and Atlantic, and will issue The River of Animals in Fall 1995.

HCP announces the 1994 South-Central Regional Conference of the Society for Photographic Education. The conference, organized by HCP, will be held November 10-12 coinciding with the opening weekend of FotoFest, the Fifth International Festival of Photography at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

SPE Events will be scheduled so that participants can also view exhibitions, participate in Meeting Place, or attend the Across Cultures symposium, all sponsored by FOTOFOEST.

Information on the SPE Conference will be mailed to HCP and SPE members in September. For further information, contact HCP at (713) 529-4755.

FOTOFOEST

FotoFest will sponsor the Fifth International Festival of Photography from November 10-30. The three major exhibitions at the George R. Brown Convention Center are:
- The Global Environment: American Voices: Contemporary Latina Photography in the United States
- Fashion: Outlaw and Outrider
- Other FotoFest events include International Meeting Place Portfolio Reviews (Nov 10-20), Palm Beach Photographic Workshops (Nov 14-19) and Lectures and Symposium, including Across Cultures: Latina Photography in the U.S. (Nov 11-12).

For information on FotoFest activities, call (713) 840-9711.
COLLECTORS' PRINT PROGRAM

These original, signed photographs are available as a benefit of membership.

By joining at $300, you can receive your choice of one of these photographs.

Members joining at $500 are offered their choice of two photographs.

For further details, call HCP at (713) 529-4755.

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Earle Hudnall, Jr., Wheels, 1991, gelatin silver print

Sally Gall, Colorado d’Or, 1986, gelatin silver print

Gay Block, Zofia Bravchiola, Poland/USA, platinum print

Gregory Crewdson, Untitled, from the Natural Wonder series, 1991, C print

Marian Pest Wlodarc, Young Boy on Wigama, Houston Hillo School, negative c. 1930, contemporary gelatin silver print

Jean Myers, San Juan de la Pelea, Spain, 1938, platinum palladium print