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Cover: Debbie Fleming Caffery, Nacozar, Mexico, 1995
Even if one could not absorb all of its manifestations, FotoFest 1998 offered a remarkable palette of historical, rarely-seen photographic art from Latin America (e.g. Geraldo de Barros’s manipulated negatives created in mid-century Brazil shown at Scadari-Sanders Gallery or Cornett’s Peruvian portraits from the late 1800s) and diverse contemporary works — including installation and video — from Slovakia, Mexico, Italy, Germany, France, Brazil, Finland, Denmark, Venezuela, Africa, Vietnam, Japan, and the United States. The international character of FotoFest is unmistakable, thus transform

Staged Photography found a congenial environment in the cavernous warehouse off Washington Street. These richly imaginative and often surrealistic photo-scapes also set the stage for my theoretical argument here: that the belated postmodernism of the young Eastern European photographers with the boundary-crossing installations of the South African artists shown at Vine Street Studios. Both share an intimate proximity to more overtly conventional, predominantly black-and-white fine art photography (Looking at the use: Young Mexican Photographers, Vine Street Studios) and straight forward photojournalism (Stories About Us: Photographs from Haaretz, DiverseWorks).

Boundary and genre definitions, however, cannot be so clearly drawn. The Mexican artists in particular confound our assumptions, as their choices of content and print type may look familiar. However, familiarity is not a helpful critical issue at the end of a long century of the medium’s evolution. The question whether any form or content of photography can alter reality beyond the codes of representational expression, that is, have an impact upon or reflect dialectically on our existential conditions, can be posed in very particular contexts. For example, the community development at Project Row Houses (featuring Danny Tisdale’s An Artist for a Change platform during FotoFest) or the border town of Juarez/El Paso where Stories About Us was created by journalists evolving the immediate and alarming consequences of their local circumstances. One could also ask whether photography is a particularly resonant medium in locales that have just undergone major political transformations. In

Two examples are Houston Community College’s decision to feature an exchange of photographic perspectives on Vietnam and Vine Street Studios’ spectacular orchestration of radically different types of work. The lack of a clear agenda worked in its favor; an all-embracing tone of playfulness and excitement on opening weekend gradually gave way to the deeper resonances of the contrasts and contemporaries of photographic representation. In the following, I will comment on a few critical conjunctions that deserve a much more in-depth analysis than I can deliver here.
Too often, Western curators have reduced Eastern European photographers to the "less serious" end of photography’s scale, often dismissing them as "social realism" or "portrait photographers," as if photography were simply a tool for capturing reality. This is a shortsighted view, as photography is a powerful tool for shaping and reflecting reality, and photographers from Eastern Europe have produced a wealth of works that challenge this perception.

Many of these photographers, such as Miro Svolík, have created powerful visual statements that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also deeply political and social. For example, Svolík's series "Family Reenactment (platinum prints, 1996)," introduced by a wall text that (ironically!) promises a Freudian family scenario: "In an old downtown hotel, I decided that my mother would be my lover and my father a stranger." The portraits of the nude family members are disconcerting and display a strange sense of real discomfort on part of the subjects. In contrast, Daniel Weinmann’s series, "Under the Same Sky (silver gelatin prints, 1994-1996)," confidently restages dream-like scenes with brightly lit characters fore-grounded in dark landscapes. The scenes revisit and mock the illogical choreographies of magical realism, and they appear as calculated and clever as March Štěpán Svolík’s image-text collages that combine small black-and-white prints with proverbial wisdom borrowed from Nahua culture. Sztanyo is from the Chipayas region and presents the material objects and sayings of the local village tradition quite literally. However, the Nahua language and indigenous attitude she uses tend to essentialize and exoticize the local culture to first-world audiences. This creates the kind of irony of perception dominating these photographs in the exhibit that allude to well-worn conventions of representing indigenous culture or Mexican iconography to the cosmopolitan centers (e.g., Carlos Larrodo’s minority subculture and skeletons in his elegant, painterly photographic style)

works, is that of dream-like cartoons. Svolík’s landscapes portray merge fragmented human and animal physiognomies with natural shapes, except that the torso’s extremities outsize our and the time, 1944-1995, stick out of the frame like limbs of a marionette and play havoc with our desire to integrate the body or read nature through the body. The fictional dimension of these fragmented scenes seem at the furthest remove from the socialist realism that may have once dominated the permitted representational codes in the Communist East.

What is interesting is that this exhibition, part of the work of the young Mexican photographers tends to be hard edged and devoid of postmodern playfulness and criticism, the rest of the exploration and personal visions of their culture at the end of the century also avoid exploiting the mythical tradition connected to the image of pre-contact Mesoamerica. Rather, Laura Barrios’s landscapes, from her Paradies series, 1997, indicates a new sensibility that is symptomatic for many of the artists presented here. Her is a purely formal and conceptual reinterpretation of the landscape, introducing a deserted, bleak vistas that contains floating signs in the upper portion of the image – computer-generated sketches of small labyrinths that evoke a more private hierarchies. I take these imposed signs to be marks of resistance. Their presence demystifies the purported resolution of the medium of photography and at the same time reveals the iconic role of photography as visual cultural memory. In these paradoxes, memory is always a matter of choice. In many of the works, it is evoked as a constructed fiction or retribution, or it abstracts the documentary paradigm to the extent that the portraits become distorted mirrors of their own preconceptions of ethnic and cultural identity.

The works by the South African artists at first seem strikingly different from the Mexican photographs. Four of the five South Africans exhibited their work as installations or constructions that include still photography or cinema, but the emphasis is on sculptural support (Jewelluth Mthethwa’s bartender dress, for instance, is the excuse for the professionals’ recreation of the living and work spaces of migrant workers in Johannesburg, 1997). Or on narrative dimensions proper to the time-based arts. Perhaps Siopis’ My Lovely Day is a weaving together of the artist’s home movies (made by her mother, accompanied by a layered voice-over memoirs, intimate diaries, history with memories of her mother and grandmother) and in homage to a small movie that she mentions her brother in the 1990s. The daughter of Greek immigrants, Siopis composes a very complex visual tale of identity in South Africa, narratively published by the themes of social homelessness and innocence of the children at play in gardens that look white in the overexposed, bleached movies. The children are yet unaware of the system of apartheid in which they grow up, but the
film never lets us forget it, as it suddenly shifts to a military parade.

William Kentridge's video installation is placed in a room opposite Sue Williamson's photocollage Truth Game that features a row of empty white ladders, truncated lines ("censored to fit," "covering up," etc.) from The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearing. Inside the room are rows of staff shadows of a screen before a screen on which Kentridge's animated drawings are projected. Composed between 1993 and 1994 and based on his own experiences of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the images attempt to address the facts and realities of life on an economic frontier overshadowed by unpredictable growth and exploitation, low-wage jobs, drug traffic, poverty, environmental and mental violence, and poverty. The panellists (several human rights activists and multiple dialogue facilitators) express their critical opinions openly, analyzing the damaging impact of SAPA's economic policies and the new global economy on the social landscape of under-developed regions transformed into maquila-doradas — the assembly lines of cheap labor for the powerful industrial states.

How openly do the images speak? If it has become fashionable to use academic and artistic circles to promote "border art" and "border theories," how are we to interpret documentary photographs of the "street shooters" from the other side of the Rio Grande? Are Julien and Gabrielle Cardona's pictures of stabbed and mutilated men, or Manuel Sáenz's shot of the decomposed body of a murdered maquiladora girl, or Ballene's gruesome close-up of a rotting face too graphic, too fantastic, or not graphic enough? Is Jaime Murrieta's photo of a young woman fighting with a knife or a shot of a young girl from Sáenz's stunning photo of Spider Man, a young masked Mexican running up the metal border fence at the Puente Nuevo to come into El Paso for work, too dramatic and beautiful?

Stories About Us includes Aurelio Sáenz Núñez's magical nighttime photo of thousands of small lights held up during a Catholic mass in a dark cathedral, side by side with I. Cantor's black and white image of a contaminated river and Sierra's more eerie shots of toxic fires blackening the sky over an illegal dump or of innumerable children playing in front of a smelter (owned by the U.S. company Asarco) that belches poisonous fumes.

The content of these images cuts into us like a knife, like the many photos of the affectation and famine and poverty we see all the time. The truth in the images cannot be doubted; reality here, on our border, is not staged, nor do the images draw formal or stylistic attention to the constructedness of their subjects. Yet nothing is explained in Jaime Murrieta's low-angle shot of a beautiful, young woman in white clothes, dried blood streaked across her face. Everything is ambiguously present in Ballene's massive selective shot of the road to Lote Bravo, an empty desert where dozens of murdered citizens have been found in the left foreground we see a plastic clown head stuck on a fence post, smiling at us under its big eyelashes. The reality of the subject matter attacks our conscience, while we also notice that the whole package of Stories About Us, like the clown's doll on the fence, is staged and calculated to achieve an effect. Someone framed the police photos and the forensic evidence and sent the photo to the north where its audience gets stuck in a moral dilemma. The theatrical manner, however, is not directed at the artistic market; rather, the show managed to position itself in an international art exhibition that would be reviewed by the international press. The attention it would draw may help its political objective, to create awareness to disquiet the Mexican government and local authorities, and to pressure the foreign-owned corporations to clean up their act (e.g. the Greenpeace interventionist strategy).

This legitimate activist objective, grounded in the visceral experience of the photographers and their unwavering commitment to testify to the devastating violence on the border, utilizes Fotofest as a platform. It does not necessarily diminish the aesthetic, formalist provocations of art photography, but it reintroduces the truth — claims of the documentary medium at a point in time when what we see has been selectively constructed and what we see is all the time. The truth in the images cannot be doubted; reality here, on our border, is not staged, nor do the images draw formal or stylistic attention to the constructedness of their subjects. Yet nothing is explained in Jaime Murrieta's low-angle shot of a beautiful, young woman in white clothes, dried blood streaked across her face. Everything is ambiguously present in Ballene's massive selective shot of the road to Lote Bravo, an empty desert where dozens of murdered citizens have been found In the left foreground we see a plastic clown head stuck on a fence post, smiling at us under its big eyelashes. The reality of the subject matter attacks our conscience, while we also notice that the whole package of Stories About Us, like the clown's doll on the fence, is staged and calculated to achieve an effect. Someone framed the police photos and the forensic evidence and sent the photo to the north where its audience gets stuck in a moral dilemma. The theatrical manner, however, is not directed at the artistic market; rather, the show managed to position itself in an international art exhibition that would be reviewed by the international press. The attention it would draw may help its political objective, to create awareness to disquiet the Mexican government and local authorities, and to pressure the foreign-owned corporations to clean up their act (e.g. the Greenpeace interventionist strategy).

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PHOTOGRAPHERS. Barth has put both viewer and subject in motion in a work reminiscent of Willem de Kooning's now famous paintings of suburban expressways seen through the windows of speeding cars. By contrast, in Untitled, 98.2 (1997), Barth depicts a scene that is deadlly still, but she more directly addresses the roots of her Modernist aesthetic and its close relationship to painting. In this photograph, a misty body of water, presumably a river, meanders through an unknown who made a career appropriating imagery from the perfectly smooth surface of Barth's photograph. Was she attempting to create the illusion of painterliness or respectfully tipping her hat to the heroic days of painting?

A portfolio of ten waterless lithographs titled in passing (1996) concluded the exhibition on a wall in the back room of the gallery. Created using advertisements and other commercial photographs, these works ally Barth with yet another important painter, Andy Warhol, who made a career appropriating imagery from the world of commerce. Barth likewise appears interested in exposing consumerism's shallow desires; in one of the portfolio, she includes the partially decipherable phrase "you need and want?" In other images, Barth presents severely cropped fragments of idealized, unknown objects and isolates them from the products they once pitched. The resulting images — an arm, strands of long blonde hair; an eye — are transformed into consumer goods and crude fictions as ambiguous as they are seductive. Cut off, quite literally, from their original contexts, these commercial snippets are easily recognized as ads, but the viewer can never be sure as to what was or is for sale.

Rarely does the exhibition space of a commercial gallery mesh perfectly with the art on view, but Lawing's understated interior — white walls, concrete floors, and best of all, no wall labels — provided an ideal setting for Barth's smart, minimalist imagery, which remains suspended somewhere between photography and painting. Visitors found nothing that detracted from the sheer pleasure of looking at these enigmatic works that seemed to float within the space, offering fleeting glimpses into familiar, lonely worlds. While Barth's photographs are imbued with an elegantly beautiful, they are intelligent works, firmly anchored in the present and engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the past.

William Thompson is the Public Affairs Officer at the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin. In his spare time he likes to think about photography.
FEBRUARY 27 - APRIL 15, 1988
THE TRANCO TOWER GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Fernando Castro

Forty years later, in front of the photographs from the Eugene Courret studio at the Transco Tower, I remembered the day my mother took me to downtown Lima and I saw his studio for the very first time. So spellbound was I by the sight of the crimson building that she had to drag me away to continue shopping. "What is that place?" I asked, but the sounds of motors and horns drowned my squeaky voice. By that time, the studio had been closed for nearly 20 years and its sumptuous interiors had been dissected into small offices and tailor shops. Only its art nouveau façade gave testimony of a city quite unlike the Lima of that time.

For years the Courret studio's sheer longevity as an important studio made it an iconic mine for historians. Its photographic activity began in 1893 and lasted until 1955. An analogous interval expands approximately from the American Civil War to the Great Depression; in Peruvian terms, from the aftermath of the economic boom resulting from guano exploitation to the return of the landed oligarchy to political power. Thus it is important to place the images of the exhibit Memory of a City: The Photographic Studio of Eugene Courret at least in the right decades and the right contexts to make more than virtual sense of them. In fact, the compelling and often intriguing beauty of many of its images makes interpretation necessary in order to avoid trivializing them.

First, I want to make a few comments about the curatorship of Memory of a City. Because cities do not literally have memories, but rather, people have memories of them, it is unclear in the exhibit who remembers what, when and whom. As it will become clearer later, this is not being faddish. Memory in the name of the exhibit can only be adjudicated to its curator, the Peruvian photographer Jorge Deustua, be, in turn, postis remembrance on the city of Lima. But even though Lima's epitaph happens to be "shame crowned," it really has no head-to-bear headgear or contain mental states. As it turns out, the memory in the curatorial line of the exhibit reflects a certain class perspective. It is a memory that remembers selectively and with a certain amount of nostalgia — tuned with only the slightest critical distance — a crucial period of Peruvian history; in the second half of the 19th century a landed oligarchy and a new class of immigrant entrepreneurs took it upon themselves to define the cultural and social contours of Peru and thereby dream up a Peruvian nation.

It is also a memory that forgets (paradox of the pygmyon in the Courret Archives there are images of a small but thriving mestizo middle class that sought the services of the most expensive studio in Lima as a symbol of their social and economic success. It also forgets much of the cosmopolitan imagery in the archive that suggests an interesting parallel between Courret and European travelers like Johann Moritz Rugendas and Alexander Von Humboldt. The insatiable transcontinental appetite of these travelers sought to inventory local "types" of people throughout the continent. The most authoritative voice on 19th century Peruvian photography including Courret, is Professor Keith McCleary, photohistorian at the University of Arizona. McCleary's writings explicitly and/or implicitly spell out many of the issues involved in curating an exhibit from the Courret corpus. For example, many negatives in the Courret Archive currently housed at the Biblioteca Nacional in Lima are not by Courret or his assistants but by other studios whose negatives were incorporated into the Courret Archive.

In addition, Eugene Courret himself returned to Paris, after a 40-year stay in Peru, and left the studio in the hands of Adolfo Dubrueil — although the studio kept Courret's name. So even negatives from the Courret studio may not be by Eugene Courret or his assistants. To complicate matters, the Courret Archive at the Biblioteca Nacional was moved there only some dozen years ago. There is reason to suppose that an interesting part of the archive is in other collections. Finally, it is not clear how thoroughly Deustua inspected the Courret Archive at the Biblioteca Nacional and other known collections.

So much for a preamble that needs to end where discussion of images begins. Although there is some validity to the curator'smise that the Courret studio — being the most expensive studio in Lima — served largely the international community, it is not the case that the studio depicted nothing but the world of the well-off. In fact, the images in the exhibit revolve around the social world of the economic elites of the time. For example, the exhibit repeatedly shows how, given a chance at a vast income party, the members of this elite, would jump at the chance to have their, children or themselves incarnate 19th century European aristocrats.

It is astounding that elites in a country whose fight for independence was still in the mouths of some who participated in it would have such cultural esteem for Europe. Especially, when as late as 1906 the Spanish fleet attacked the Port of Callao in an attempt to reestablish colonial rule. This lack of national identity explains, to a great extent, the anachronistic images of the tapados. According to McCleary, in the outift of a tapado (literally meaning covered), "the monarchical tradition inherited from the early conquistadores, ladies of good breeding in colonial Lima covered all but their eyes when in public and viewed events in the street from behind the wooden screens of their balconies." When tapados were photographed by Courret, they were already a nostalgic anachronistic custom yearned for as a possible source of identity in a time when such sources were few. So the whole section of the exhibit entitled Colonial Recreation reflects well the perception of cultural diffuseness prevailing in Peru during the third quarter of the 19th century. While the descendants of early Spanish immigrants longed for colonial times, the new English, French, Irish, Italian, German and Swiss immigrants dreamed about the European aristocracy.

Perhaps it is not surprising at all that descendants of Europeans should have a predilection for things European. The Millenium's surrender of national traits for the sake of a novel aesthetic has specific reasons that make it the exception rather than the rule. However, both the请教 the detached national projects in the American were from their indigenous peoples. The resurrection of autochthonous culture in Peru would have waited until the 1940s for a context in which, curiously enough, the
landed oligarchy was weakened by an entrepreneurial class who sought to construct a strong modern industrial state. Nothing is shown about that revival in this exhibit — perhaps there is nothing about it in the archives.

It is worth remembering that in Mexico, the xenophobia of the landed conservatives had a bizarre chapter when with the aid of Napoleon III, they conspired to establish in their own country a European monarchy in the guise of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian. In fact this episode of Mexican history had repercussions in South America where a wave of anti-French sentiments ensued while at the same time Limitos continued to fancy French trappings. McElroy describes the antithesis with which the Courret's

In increasing numbers European immigrants of different nationalities arrived in Peru from the mid-19th century on. In the exhibit, the Frans, the Gardlands, the Dubois, the Rospiollos, the Bohms, the Gasperris, the Courrets and the Dubreuls are members of colonies that behaved exactly like colonies do. Each colony had its own school, its own clubs, its own field of business. Many new immigrants like the Courrets were entrepreneurs. Others, like the English, were involved in the guano trade, and later, came as employees of the Grace Company that took over the Peruvian railway system when Peru went bankrupt in 1875. The Italians came to control the banking system and towards the end of the century were the most powerful economic force in Peru. The

a leash around his neck. The intention of such an image may have been to identify the cooie in case he ran away. What one does see in the exhibit is many prosperous Chinese who could have possibly been liberated cooies or simply later immigrants who arrived in Peru after the sale and transport of cooies was proscribed by 1875. It is important to note that when the sale of cooies was still legitimate in Peru, no Chinese women immigrated to Peru. So the image of the marriage of a mestiza to a prosperous Chinese man has special significance.

The period of Peruvian history extending after 1890 and 1912 was called by Peruvian historian Jorge Basadre The Aristocratic Republic. During this period, the landed oligarchy ruled the country through the Partido Civilista — a political party that was more like a club than a party. Many landowners had private armies that were more powerful than the government forces. In their respective regions they ruled as feudal lords ruthlessly exploiting indigenous peoples, Chinese cooies and Afro-Peruvians. In reality it would have been a better choice of words to call this period The Oligarchic Republic because these landowners were few rather than many. In spite of their economic nationalism reflected in protectionist policies such as import tariffs, the landed oligarchy aspired to the accouterments of a European lifestyle just as much as the new immigrants did; and the latter provided the former with them. Even the look of the city of Lima began to change towards the fin de siècle.

Inspired by the transformation of Paris commanded by Baron Haussmann, the urban planners of many Latin American cities sought the new Paris as an ideal modern city. In Lima, the promenades, the wide boulevards, the parks, plazas, museums and public buildings began to have a French look. Modern life was celebrated in dozens of illustrated magazines. The Courret studio itself contributed copiously to a few magazines. A portrait of the Russian ballet dancer Anna Pavlova appears in the pages of Mundial. One wonders if the prime motive for the other portrait of Pavlova — the one that appears in the exhibit — was photojournalism and not just tableau portraiture.

As early as 1872 a building called Palacio de la Exposición (now Museo de Arte de Lima) leads the push towards modernity. The steel structure of the building was designed by no other than Efelfe, the building itself, was designed by the Italian architect Antonio Leonardi. For the Lima Exposition of 1872, Leonardi qua junior awarded the Courret studio a gold medal for portraits with a "Rebrandl Effect."

From the flamboyant style of Courret evidenced in his self-portrait — which contrasts so markedly with that of his
Angel with an Edge

Recent Work by
Debbie Fleming Caffery

MARCH 5 - APRIL 8, 1998
GREMIOLI & CO. FINE ART
HOUSTON, TEXAS

April Rapier

After years of honing her art, Debbie Fleming Caffery's photography took off like a storm across the desert, tweaking the vision of everyone in her path. Her popularity is easy to understand; she is a dark-hearted Buck trapped in seraph's flesh — narrator, diviner, interpreter (but never judge), visionary. She is mystical in the same way Arbus was, believing in things others can't see or won't acknowledge or are too embarrassed or intimidated by to try and understand. A graciously accommodating loner, she seems to thrive in both emotional and physical isolation, occasionally venturing out to source stimulation and feed inspiration. Staying put until jettisoned by an unquenchable need to see firsthand provides her with the solitude, energy and focus necessary to observe and participate in the uncomfortable realm of unknown and indiscernible, such comfortable between home, hell and all things in between feeds her clarity as well as dispasionate and instantaneous connected observing and filtering skills, allowing her to process the visual world she seeks as requisite wistiness, then to offer it back embraced, enhanced and intensified ten-fold.

At first glance, she appears to perceive landscapes and elements beyond her subject, yet almost as though she enters their psyches and merges with their souls, working inside the physical boundaries of the images she conjures, becoming and knowing the players for the time it takes to represent them honestly and fully. What some might call the dark side could be defined as integrity or at least peace of mind, even when meandering off-base in sentimental territory. Thus is the work completely devoid of the terminally dull psychosubliminal misfire of self-consciousness. Seeing from the inside out places a lot of responsibility on the viewer, but we seem to be ready enough and certainly prepared, having been fed appropriate responses throughout a fairly dull decade of image-making.

She often assigns herself to extraordinary subject matter and delivers it to neutral ground, doing it divine justice. But the ordinary is her true calling, and it is transformed because she chooses to honor it with a keen eye and hypnotic concentration, admiring it for what it is, never attempting to cast it in a false but more dramatic light. She neither sensationalizes nor trivializes. Yet in the same breath she and her subjects form a covenant, an instantaneous mutual understanding of all the hopes and dreams and desires ever thought or whispered, and they spill distilled into the heart of a single picture, a wish in time.

Dark and blurry and shadowy and ambiguous, her technique leads the viewer to believe that the moment is far more important than the medium. Darkness obscures the obvious, and softness takes on sharper edges. She uses it to great advantage, printing big, bold and contrasty. Backgrounds are generally neutral, banal, yet subtly suggestive and referential, highly effective slight-of-hand. Similarly, darkness and shadow define, adjust, and color perception, emotion and initial response. The embodiment of all she brings to a situation, both physically and spiritually, lives within the pictures in a thousand different ways and interpretations. Raised up solidly Catholic in the heart of Louisiana (where physical distance is insalubrious and irrelevant), she nods and winks at the ethereal plane where sacred and profane cohabit, references sublimated to objectivity. An example of this is a dark-skinned man holding a white goose, wings unfolded to make an angel of them both. Both are bored and eyes lowered, as if to acknowledge impending doom. Searching the image for clues, the hazy, nondescript background transforms itself into a crucifix shape. The man is hot, his hair wet against his forehead, touchingly erotic but meaningless to context. A small slip of white shoe-heel appears at his neck where the top of the bird's wing rests, grounding the viewer, pitting improbable against highly likely, and removing all traces of artifice.

A kindred image shows a young girl from behind, her smile radiant and barely visible. She is dancing with a powerful, more or less abstract symbol of respect and submission (since Vatican II, removed from the whitewashed and demystified services that modern churches offer), the once ubiquitous head covering mantilla as icon and artifact. As she shakes, she shakes from its intricate lace the ghosts that gather around religion and ritual, the gesture speaks to the joy, spontaneity and freshness of youthful devotion. Behind her, white clouds boil toward a dark patch of sky, another endless horizon withholding information as it beckons. A similar devotional conflict permeates the image of a little girl being held by her mother, who watches her with overwhelming tenderness and hopefulness. The girl is in costume, light bouncing off shiny white satin and tinsel crocheted tiara and wings. She struggles against the sleep that will overtake her, determined to observe, participate, remember. One can clearly see the magic through her eyes, and the damage being done.

Fire figures prominently in Caffery's pictures, sourceless, unquenchable, self-
sustaining, seemingly harmless — a gesture or grace note rather than a threat. It is used, for example, in an effort to explain loss, demonstrated in a Dia de los Muertos image of a woman kneeling beside a grave, a candle holding its own against the overbearing darkness. Her need to be understood, her sorrow experienced, is palpable (an emotion seen just as clearly in the portrait of a forlorn woman thrusting a star-patterned balloon at the camera, an absurdist offering to ward off what she cannot understand about her life). That she is wearing a mask and resting a hand palm up on the soil separating her from the essence and inevitability of death is both unfathomable and perfectly logical. Both fire and darkness are portrayed as comforting, like the wind or a cooling spray off the ocean, but this is to be expected. Caffrey’s fearlessness is her ticket in, her fight-or-flight instincts operating in reverse. Satan in the flesh couldn’t scare this home-girl — one sideways glance would send him fleeing with forked tail tucked. Perhaps the invitation to participate at the insider level is all that matters, the afterimage (whether in memory or the print itself) a mere map to the next off-limits destination. The experience is far more important than the proof of the trophy, which is why, more often than not, she is witness to that which should be utterly private, off limits. As for the photographic evidence, she is neither acknowledged by nor visible to those she moves alongside.

Caffrey observes the mundane and then flash-freezes it, eliciting the same shame a voyeur might experience during an evening stroll when something inside the safe comfort and supposed privacy of a house along the way is framed by an undrawn curtain, catching you up and stopping you cold. Those who populate the everyday are caught mid-act, like dioramas in a Pompeii museum, and so the most normal acts are elevated to absurdist levels, performed with feverish intensity, never to be performed again. In one such picture, a young boy bends down from the waist in an utterly male gesture, observing his tricycle for signs of — well — anything that might need his attention, while a torso (female, arms folded mom-like) stands planted, watching from the sidelines. A car frames the right side of the image, door wide open, an inviting portent of the next likely chapter to occupy his energy and obsession. Caffrey is bearing witness to an important ritual, one equal in developmental magnitude to those formalized by religion or institution — a universal moment of history and truth. Despite the power of the moment and the temptation to intervene or editorialize, she allows both sides of the story to fend for themselves. Because she is able to step a moment cold, the viewer is granted the power of breathing life back in, imagination determining outcome.

Whether immersed in Halloween costumes, ancient religious ceremonies or adolescent and romantic rites of passage, her translations and transformations take at least one turn through terror before landing or concluding. One can imagine her bedtime stories having scored the sweet bitters of her kids, inherent sweetness the antidote to their fear. She is so good at throwing the viewer off balance only because she sees to it that there is safe and common ground on which to land. She creates from a positive, productive and powerful position, but understands intuitively to embrace the requisite obstacles that lead her there. Caffrey is the great equalizer, acknowledging horror in beauty, panic in calm, poverty and need in abundance, evil in good, guilt in grace, anger and pain in peacefulness, and all the aforementioned in glaring, contradictory and glorious mirror image.

April Riper is an artist and writer living in Houston.
DISAPPEARING ACT

Joan Seeman Robinson

FEBRUARY 13 - MAY 17, 1998
THE MENSIL COLLECTION, CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUM AND THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON HOUSTON, TEXAS

"You are not going anywhere unless there's a wall in front of you."
Robert Rauschenberg

There's an early photograph of Robert Rauschenberg reclining full length across a high wall (Untitled [self-portrait], 1952). Barely visible above him is the edge of one of his own paintings, its flecked surface echoed in his paint-splattered pants. He appears preoccupied and withdrawn, his hands resting inactively near the center. Actually, Rauschenberg had directed the camera lens downward so that his cement floor occupies nearly two-thirds of the lower frame. It's a tricky image in which spatial recession becomes illusionistically vertical. The result is that he appears to have been shaved, assimilated into his surroundings as if the camera, scanning its options, had equated concrete, mattress, man and painting. He once said to Barbara Rose in a long and informative interview, "When I go to work I have to feel invisible to get away from the inferiority that is attached to Bolt." With Susan Weil, his wife in 1959, he made Untitled [double Rauschenberg] by pressing his nude body on a photostatic blueprint paper so that, when exposed to light, his outline was preserved. It is his absence that we see, made apparent to us only after he has risen and removed himself from the surface. The white silhouette seems to invoke his activity; he undressed, determined his pose and lay down for a period of time. He created his double, and then — repositioning his body — made a mirror image of that. The radiant residue, a glowing vacancy hovering in ultramarine blue, is sternly braced, the lateral wings of its bent arms and legs subdividing the entire surface so that figure and ground positive and negative, are interlocked and equivalent. But it is also a hieratic pose suggesting growth and re-emergence, one figure impending another, as if birthing a second self from the simple "Jesus" head they share.

These life-size blueprints record the artist at work, exploring alternative roles, innovative strategies and transparent substances, his fascination with light and shadows and with darkness itself. In 1943 he made some very large paintings, applying crumpled newspapers to them which he'd soaked in black paint sometimes pressed into gravel so their surfaces engaged with the ground that he walked on. His former teacher at Black Mountain College, Josef Albers, had stressed the values of black and white, and Rauschenberg obsessively documented this series in photographs. He followed them with stark white paintings, exuding from them any evidence of his handwork. John Cage liked these radically reductive experiments to "airports for movement"; they were environments for the shadows produced by the activities of Rauschenberg and his colleagues. He photographed himself between two of these proscenium works, one white and one black, arranged at right angles to each other, their reeding diagonals point to his seated figure at the center. Strong diagonals are prominent in other early photographs dramatizing signs of the absence of bodies. In Quiet House, 1949, (in memory of the death of Mark Drieh, son of Theodore Drieh and nephew of the famous art patron, Katherine Drieh) slanting beams of light work powerfully to warp the frame of a ladder-back chair. In Mod with Two Souls, his tilted camera throws the stylumic (some say phallic) assemblage of two light bulbs and a shaft into precipitous decline, as if challenging his surroundings. "I want to free my body, my head and my thoughts from my ego," he has said. "I need to be free from my fears also ... I think fears are the same as ego," by shorn and shadow — reflected light across the glintening surface, the cast shadows of the object's stretchers and the whitewashed brick wall. Both of these images, the black carriage and the black painting, suggest his penetrating and empathetic engagement.

In 1952, he went to Italy and North Africa. Short on funds and with meager resources, he had two important companions, the painter Cy Twombly and, again, his own camera. Cy and Bob, Venice is a double exposure; they had photographed each other but failed to advance the film between shots. The scenery surrounding them resounds with other twoosomes — the elegant horses over the west facade of St. Mark's (and a shadowy third), and the bell rings high above them, astride the bell tower. While in Rome, Rauschenberg stationed himself in profile behind colossal

Robert Rauschenberg, Untitled [self-portrait], Black Mountains, ca. 1952

The ghost of Rauschenberg's presence inhabits many more of his photographs. It is though Albert's advice that he develop a personal sense of looking reinforced his attachment to vernacular objects. The worn seat of Untitled (Interior of an Old Carriage), 1949, suggests shelter, an easy pace and the passage of time. In his most austere documentary photograph, titled Monochrome Black Painting, (1953) geometric and planar severity are overtake

Cy Twombly and, again, his own camera. Cy and Bob, Venice is a double exposure; they had photographed each other but failed to advance the film between shots. The scenery surrounding them resounds with other twoosomes — the elegant horses over the west facade of St. Mark's (and a shadowy third), and the bell rings high above them, astride the bell tower. While in Rome, Rauschenberg stationed himself in profile behind colossal

Robert Rauschenberg, Charleston Window, 1952

Robert Rauschenberg, Bob & Cy, Venice, 1952

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Rauschenberg had constructed a "collection wall" of crates and planks for privacy in a shared room, creating compartments for what Walter Hopps called a "cultural environment" of the things that he valued — rocks, plants, insects and even small animals. Inspired in this case by the primitive surroundings and the raw materials collected when he and Twombley visited North Africa, these modest boxes house bones, rugs, drift, rocks, thorns, shells, beads, winged insects and, in one disturbing example, a photograph of the artist himself under a plastic lens, imbedded in dirt through which sharp pins are thrust. These diminutive scatoli personale resonate with private references, the boxes distinguishing each from the other, as if episodically. The composition of the overall photograph recalls Maxite's The Red Studio in which paintings and sculptures, a precious compendium of his aesthetic interests, are arranged on a red ground that is faintly delineated as the area of his studio. They suffered as the singular evidence of his most meaningful activities, just as Rauschenberg provides archival evidence of his own exotic itinerary. In The Red Studio, however, no further mystery is intimated. But Rauschenberg's scatoli have covers, and their scale is to the hand. The action implied is that of uncooking what is hidden, but which, when disclosed, just becomes more elusive.

Note how Rauschenberg photographs another group of fragile assemblages, the Fettici Personale or "hanging fetishes," fragments of the 4th century statue of Constantine the Great, orienting him toward Constantine's sitting finger and tall column on the right — projecting him into a prestigious classical context. In a sequence of four more images Twombley descends steps until confronting the camera, his head deleted for a selective emphasis on the ancient greek toses as it gradually supplants the spatial recession of the stairs.

Then Rauschenberg explores the Flea Market, where he focuses on an old motorized automobile, its rear window peering out above shrouds of crusty tarps. Another car, its bumper bent into a soft arabesque, is draped with a fringed satin brocade. These shabby vehicles are monumentalized, filling the frame, and treated respectfully as if in deference to their service. He has explained, "I like the history of objects. I like the humanitarian reporterage." In another shot, a standing man peruses a book while displaying his wares — racks of eyeglasses — which seem to address us as we survey them.

The Scatoli Personale (personal boxes), 30 of which he arranged and photographed on the floor of the Pienatore Allegri in Rome in 1953, are, by title and purpose, surrogates for the artist. As a child in the coastal city of Port Arthur, Texas, overlooking the Mississippi River, he built boathouses, and he has said that he "wanted the boathouses to be like the places I had been, the places I imagined, but not true images of the places."

Rauschenberg had been to the Flea Market in prior years, and he had a sense that it was a place where things could be found. He was interested in the idea of collecting and preserving objects, and he saw the Flea Market as a place where one could find interesting things that had been discarded or forgotten. He was also interested in the idea of the "collection wall," which he had created in his apartment, and he saw the Flea Market as a place where he could find objects to add to his collection.

Robert Rauschenberg, Chaseway Sunnyside (Wall), 1983 (Original in color)

Robert Rauschenberg, Chaseway Sunnyside (Wall), 1983 (Original in color)

Robert Rauschenberg, Chaseway Sunnyside (Wall), 1983 (Original in color)
Emotional Landscapes

HANS STAATJES
APRIL 2 - 30, 1998
PURSE BUILDING STUDIOS
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Johannes Birringer

"In the absence of reference, my eyes dance. I move faster, and the space gives way. I forget how I got there, then I freeze without freezing, holding the moment in spirit but not in form. The weight of gravity hangs on me like little drops of rain on wet skin." I find these not a new rehearsal booth, and there are strange dark dots on white paper next to them. I don't remember when I drew them, but performances always grow over time, a life-time, and one grown in the dark as each movement must be found again or felt again before it can be seen or moved on. This is a photograph whose work I never quite knew very well, although I did meet him in the theater. In the late sixties, and we have exchanged notes over the years. He knows as much about work and has photographed it, trying to shoot the movement without document- ing the dance. I knew of his interest in sculpture and three-dimensional form, but I always considered him a purist who insisted on the quality of the prints he made and on pushing the photographic medium further towards the non-objec- tive and the non-expressive. If there is a modernist equivalent to pure dance in photography, I imagine it to be such string- ing towards simplicity: how can one make a non-referential photograph, evacuated of any literal meaning yet still remaining a photograph, complex and radiant?

Now I know his exquisite and careful explorations of the tactile textures of shapes that could be flesh, bodily extremi- ties or fantasied internal physiognomies or anything else one might project into these two-dimensional images. I approach them as a dancer, which means I don't pretend to be able to describe them liter- 1 ally nor claim to have found a conceptual or metaphorical language that could contain their evocative power of abstraction.

I will drift through them. New Emotional Landscapes, shown at Purse Building Studios right after the equally exquisite Postt Samantha (Fotofest 1997), had removed his silent landscapes of the icy northern nights, a revelation. The im- pact of the exhibition for me lies in its subtle internal contradictions. The photo- graphs have surfaces that are exactly porous; they are intimate objects but don't disclose their nature and the space in which the light pours through them. Originally intended to remain untitled, Staatjes has now inscribed them with allusions to geographical, geological or psychological layers. Layers of the legisla- tion that are states of being and becom- ing, in flux, frozen and yet pulsating with intimations like the cooler wind that arrives with winter.

Back in January Staatjes participated in a performance "happening" I staged at the former Mercado del Sol, now an archi- tectural ruin with its resurrection. In a 5,000 square-foot space on the fourth floor, Staatjes positioned eight prints from his Flesh series on the floor, gently leaning them against the pillars that sup- port the roof. In the dark, vacant space of the haunted building, these photographs seemed to emit their own light, as if yiel- ding temperature to a skeleton structure of wooden bones, naked extremities. Dim light, gray tones, shadows, dark angles — interrupted by white curves — gave the room a sensation of a kinetic sculpture that moved in the air, like a monochro- matic Calder mobile suspended upside- down.

In these months before New Emotional Landscapes, Staatjes seemed to take stock of the process he had undergone in the mid-1990s when he enrolled in the sculpt- ure department at University of Houston. Photographs and even his own resin sculptures, participating in group shows in which he would exhibit the three-dimensional sculptural objects beside-by-side with the photographs he made of them.

New Emotional Landscapes must be considered a break-through, because in this exhibition the sculptural objects, however much they fascinated me as fragile, surrealistic constructions when I saw them in the studio, are absent. The focus is entirely on the 1 x 10 inch silver gelatin prints, their careful variations in richness of tone, gradations of light and shadow, and their beautiful pictorial textures. There are 14 prints in the show. The cycle begins with the rudy and ends with four extraordinary, per- plexing photographs: "sensing release, the stretch, fold and rhythm of erosion 2. A number of photographs in the show invite anthropomorphizing readings: I glimpse the curve of a breast or a bent knee, the sharp angle of an elbow or the hollow space under an arm. I'm tricked into think- ing that these ripples here are stretch marks or perhaps the soft, blurred close-up of the depression of a navel, and over there is a bulging muscle oddly twisted into an illogical knot of flesh. There are erotic shapes and pathetic nodules, like the swellings I sometimes notice on my body after a fall. I move closer to the surface, and my eyes begin to swim. There are hundreds of tiny grainy dots as if the blurring of the photograph object created a pointillist painting on a gray canvas. The gentle shifts in color and light in these black- and-white photographs create a misty, dream-like feeling, as if I were walking into an early morning fog, following a distant sound that cannot be located. White light weaves an egg-like shape around a darker area. In haunting release a thin, bright white rivulet pours down from the top, creating a zigzag line before fading. Staatjes images create fields of the subconscious, I get lost in momentary reverse, No shape really imposes itself here, but I can follow a curve or a round- ness to where it loses all definition and become pure gray tones.

Like the pigmentation of skin, chang- ing with age or exposure to light and sun, the textures resonate with deeper impli- cations. The human body, its fluidities, vertebrae, cavities, protrusions, ligaments, inner organs and, above all, its skin mem- brane, is hinted at. But the work encour- ages the mixing of metaphors, and spin- nous process can look like cervical ripples of a hill or like a cranial wave breaking against the moist sand and pebbles of a lunar beach. Staatjes holds back defi- nitively, as if wanting to avoid any literal reference to concrete physical body shape or, worse, to fashionable contemporary obsession with body politics and sexual- ities, the obscene or object body, or other themes of cultural transformation often suggested by current work in morphing and digital manipulation. His artistic achievement lies in the poetic quality of these non-objective images, their rich sug- gestiveness and the quiet effect they have on our sensory awareness. His is a poetry perhaps inspired by geography and the movement of water. Naming the works landscapes allows me to imagine how I associate my own body, or phantasm of my skin and my interior body, with the grainy irregularities of shape that I see in the stretch. Such irregularities evoke inner anxieties, but they also tempt me to let go and follow the current of light as it flows through the skin. The light in Staatjes photographs creates a distinct aura or emanation, not one associated with dis- tance (sight) but with proximity (touch) and sensual boundary-surfaces. These highly physical images, manually pro- duced after a laborious process of light- ing the sculptural objects, shooting, and developing, betray the artist's love of the tactile aspects of printing. This tactile intensity awards the work its deeper and deeply satisfying emotional resonances.

Johannes Birringer is a choreographer/director based in Houston.
Luis Mallo: Through a Glass Darkly
JUNE 11 - JULY 8, 1996
SCARAB SANDRA GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS
Boana Marcoulence

It is strange how, at the end of this cen-
tury, photography is still considered to be "photographic art," or, at best, "photographic imagery." It is of course only a "question of taste," prevalent though it may be; but for this very reason, it should not be man-
dated, imposed, preached, universalized.

Photography as a medium is a complex set of procedures for manipulating light whereby another reality than what the visual sense can perceive is presented to our attention, as if created ex nihilo. Nobody denies that reportage photography is a medium of discovery; everyday events are not seen or only heard of before and that it is a powerful tool for social knowledge, ideological penetration, moral instruction, let alone for sheer visual delight and it is here to stay. Yet parallelling modern experiments in art, whether in the direction of abstraction or of the "lived concrete," photography dares now go in the direction of the non-representative, non-figurative (not necessarily abstract). In Luis Mallo we encounter, this other version of photography, pushed to the extreme, as conveyor of intimates, if nebulous, feelings mercurially occasioned by objects as supports for meditation — sometimes metaphys-
cical, sometimes psychological. It is an art of illusion barely geared at the referent but far more up to revealing the subject's feeling of inadequacy vis-à-vis perceived reality.

In the case of the "Delirios," the objects were mostly classical or medieval sculptures from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They occasioned a peculiar transmutation into a chinoiserie so intense as to project us into a world of myth. Mallo's is an ambitious attempt at translating philosophical meditation in its...
SLEEP-WALKING

A BRONX FAMILY ALBUM: THE IMPACT OF AIDS
BY STEVE HARR
SCALO PUBLISHERS

A. D. Coleman

In a controversial article I published in 1984, titled Information, Please, I wrote:

"The emergent new forms of information technology — the computer and the electronically encoded image — seem to be the logical successors of the mass-circulation magazine and the mass-market book. Yet there has been surprisingly little exploration of these new vehicles by documentary photographers and photojournalists. ... How is it that our arguments over documentary photography and photojournalism are still centered around magazines, books, and gallery exhibits?"

The intervening 14 years have certainly not brought us a flood of experiments in combining the informationally-oriented approaches to photography with these new forms. Yet in the two most widely available new formats — the World Wide Web and the CD-ROM — we begin to have examples we can use as reference points, if not as benchmarks. Steve Hart's much-celebrated A Bronx Family Album: The Impact of AIDS (which, most recently, won him the ICP's 1998 Infinity Award for Photojournalism) seems to function right now as the most high-profile of these. I think it needs to be considered on two levels: as a documentary project and as an example of CD-ROM usage. Furthermore, some questions about the politics of this particular medium need to be addressed.

I want to start with the last of these and send my way toward the first.

I have worked on a computer since 1987 and have run a large-scale, multi-subject Web site since fall 1993. I'm no hacker, but I'm working with reasonably current if not cutting-edge equipment and programs, am comfortable with and known how to use most of them. Yet I took more than two months to get this CD-ROM up and running in order to explore its contents. I tested it on three machines. First, I had to update a first-generation version of QuickTime VR (which comes on the CD-ROM) to handle its kinetic features. Then I had to experiment with turning on and off the virtual memory and several extensions. I never did get it going on my IBM ThinkPad, and it keeps crashing my admittedly Mac Power PC clone. But, for some reason I haven't figured out, my considerably clunker of a Mac Performa 650CD plays it just fine — quite apt for a video interview with Hart that still comes out scrambled.

I say all this to point up a simple truth as a technological form, the CD-ROM is not yet as easy to use as a book. Any reader with hands and eyes can pick up a book and work his or her way through it. Getting a CD-ROM up and running may require not only a certain level of hardware (which has its price and thus its politics) but also a certain level of computer know-how (which also has its price and thus its politics). To a considerable extent, those facts determine the market for works generated in this medium and thus to some extent their audience.

I separate somewhat the market for the CD-ROM and its audience because, for example, an institution with the technology and know-how to present this CD-ROM adequately — a public library, a museum, a school, a local cultural center, a drug—or AIDS-education venue — could buy it, set it up and make its contents readily accessible to hundreds, even thousands of viewers for the cost of one copy. Depending on the size of the viewing screen and the viewing space, it could be looked at either by a single individual or even an audience full of people — unlike a book. There's a politics to that as well which also must be acknowledged with turning on and off the virtual memory and several extensions.

"There's a tremendous breakthrough awaiting us in this decade. We're still just bottom-feeding on this idea of interactivity," admitted the Brenda Laurel (who gave us the home version of Pac-Man) in a summer 1991 lecture in Rochester. So far as I can see, this remains true. Which is to say that while A Bronx Family Album makes good use of the CD-ROM form as an elementary archive and retrieval system for large amounts of material in different media (images, video, sound files, text), it doesn't utilize fully the hypertextual, multimedia potentials of the form to enable you to follow various trails and move freely and in an idiosyncratic exploratory way between them.

Basically, you can enter Hart's sequence of his images at any point, let it run forward programmed with listening to Hart's terse vocal captioning; or you can move forward or backward along the sequence, one image at a time; or, in perhaps two dozen instances, you can jump from selected images to albedos — pertinent spoken and transcribed passages from longer interviews with the protagonists. Alternately, you can move to the full audiotaped interviews (each divided into half a dozen subsections); look at two small images of the speakers and listen to any one of them while simultaneously scrolling down a transcript thereof or attend to either format separately. Or you can go to a screen of thumbnail portraits of the principals in the narrative, click on any one and get a brief synopsis of their relation to the others and their current status quo.

But all this material is 1-talk-you-listen, which means that the project's sub-title, an "interactive CD-ROM," implies a lot more self-determination for the user than it actually delivers. The accompanying booklet describes it accurately as "user-friendly and intuitive," and its organizational structure is clearly indicated and not very hard to master. However, interactively, results for sense or to compare both versions for accuracy. Thus a child psychologist's suggestion that the children's play activity with dolls is "transferrable," a precise diagnostic term, is rendered confusingly here as "transparent." Ralph's recollection that in a young shoe-shine boy in Puerto Rico he was "smoking weed — pot" has been transmuted into the incomprehensible "smoking wheetbaud." Many such garbled mistranscriptions were in the sampling of the interviews to which I listened while reading their print versions.

Even like these embarrass the photographer and the publisher; they represent a significant inattention to quality control. I cannot urge too strongly that those who engage in the production of material in electronic forms recognize their obligation to maintain basic standards of literacy. Which brings me to the meat of the

Houston Center for Photography
project: Hart’s photographic narrative and the contextualizing material with which he’s surrounded it.

In 1991, Hart befriended and began to photograph and otherwise track the lives of "Ralph and Sena, a Puerto Rican couple living on welfare with four children between the ages of two and thirteen." They resided in the South Bronx. Both adults were HIV-positive; Sena was crack-addicted; Ralph an ex-junkie. Hart photographed them across the seven-year stretch reflected here (the project remains ongoing), tape-recorded them at length, recorded others — social workers, psychiatrists, drug-abuse and AIDS specialists — speaking about them and about the larger picture of which they form telling details. Hart’s probing black-and-white photographs are sensitive to and respectful of the family, intimate without feeling intrusive. Clearly, they all accepted him as part of their company and proceeded to ignore his activity, minimizing the perturbation effect inevitably generated by a photographer’s presence. He worked during their happiest passages as well as amidst and in the aftermath of ongoing trauma of all kinds: domestic violence; addiction and drug use; Sena’s return to prostitution; expulsion from the family; eventual death from AIDS-related causes; the eldest daughter’s running away from home and getting pregnant; several of the other children’s placement in foster homes; and more.

Informed, like much contemporary documentary, with some ideas and visual tropes from the fine-art approaches, Hart’s pictures nonetheless stay within the tradition of their form. They maintain a gravity and balance, an attention to the inner lives of his subjects made visible, that vivifies and particularizes these troubled, struggling people and invites one’s attention to their plight. Hart’s own voice-over to the image sequence — which is structured chronologically — is understated yet full of feeling, as some of his emotions right below the surface of his words, and he clearly had to work hard to keep his account of their complex, ongoing cases from subversion in either mawkishness or horror. The extensive accompanying interviews provide a great deal of contextualizing material — autobiographical, personal — from various members of the family, plus the commentators of Hart and professionals in the fields of medicine and social service. There’s much here to explore at length. It would take several days for anyone to go through everything the disk offers, to return to its key sections and begin to digest it as a totality.

Yet, their sober and haunting quality aside, Hart’s own pictures and his accompanying spoken comments on the events they depict, which presumably constitute the core of this project, begins to bother me. Eventually, as it returned to them again and again, the problem began to clarify. In a manner oddly akin to Nan Goldin’s handling of her subjects over long stretches of time, Hart has effectively if unconsciously co-opted this family, separated it even from the immediate microcosm in which it functions. We never meet friends, neighbors, teachers, classesmates, playmates, cops, social workers, adoptive parents. We never see this family interacting with relatives or other families or at school, in the grocery store, at the welfare office, at the dentist.

They seem to know no one and to do nothing, day in and day out. Are they so isolated and inept in real life? Hard to believe and the various stories they tell suggest otherwise. Yet, excepting one image of Ralph in jail and two of the family at funerals, we see them exclusively at home or occasionally in the park, interacting only with each other (though now and then with new lovers), at play or resting. And Hart’s spoken words don’t place any of them in a larger social, economic or political frame. In his version of their lives they inhabit a virtually sealed environment, something akin to a toxic, telephonic biosphere, they grade imposing while relentlessly reproducing.

This seems to me a seriously missed bet. If ever a medium were made for establishing shots, footnotes, digressions, sidetracks, parallel narratives, flashbacks and fast-forwards, it’s the CD-ROM. The interviews provide a much richer informational environment in which to place this family’s history, but no one — Hart included — seemed inclined to construct any cause-and-effect hypotheses here, whether along cultural, political, socioeconomic, educational, racial, ethnic or other lines. And while the adults — Ralph and Sena and a few others — are not presented as pathetic, helpless victims of forces beyond their control, they’re also not considered as autonomous individuals fully accountable for their own actions, citizens whose behavior demands not only scrutiny but assessment. Instead, Ralph, Sena, their lovers and progeny all are treated here not as beings with free will but as forces of nature, human tornadoes, factories of perpetual havoc.

In the world constructed by this CD-ROM, Lewis Howes’s challenges his presumed right to live off welfare, take drugs, to conceive, give birth and raise children while addicted and/or HIV-positive and to impose the consequences of that behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, the connotations of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large.
Exhausting in that one must look closely and think hard: exhilarating because here, if one takes the time, is a town. We fall in the gaps — and there are many. To my thought, the physical but unphotographed town of Heber Springs, coupled with its myriad untold stories, roll jointly beneath these photographs like waves. One's imagined vista of Main Street, the stores, the high school, the movie house, the homes and farms, the trees and creeks, combined with the mute potential of all those unseen words — the gossip, jokes, tragedies, crops, weather, crimes, holidays, pioneer paths and family histories — all those inciden- tals that describe these lives and at some point led these people first to Heber Springs and then to Mike Disfarmer's handsome studio, float the photographs like cork. The design of the book melds the photographs with this perceived history (the "photographic fiction" that Richard Avedon described but did not seem to capture in his photographs of the American West) with the result being an experience that is transporting.

In the background of all this hovers the World War II. Most of Disfarmer's subjects had never left Heber Springs, and we can assume that many of these pictured in the photos are about to be shipped out to dangerous places or are about to be left behind. With the utilitarian purpose of these photographs then likely being one of remembrance or a safeguard against death — and the yearning looks an attempt to express all those things that are so difficult to express: be careful; I love you; Come home safely; This is what I look like; Remember me; Please don't go. We must remember also that honing in the background is the photographer, this strange Mike Dis- farmer who somehow has enabled these people to be free enough with their quiet, tentative expressions to communicate the same sorts of things to all of us today.

This is what we see like; This is who we are; We want to be remembered; We care about you; We hope this is not good-bye. Spend some time with this book, and these people may stay with you forever.

Photographic Surgery

The Commissar Vanishes

by David King


David Jacobs

"How many photographs have you seen today?"

Film as a form of class.

"How many? Where'd you see them? What were they about?"

The best reaction to no answers is more questions.

Two intrepid students launch in, and soon we're into billboards, a newspaper, a magazine, a TV, a movie. After a while, "How many and that you didn't know you saw?"

"What?"

"How many entered you before you knew it? How many are lodged in there, beyond memory or recall? Beyond consciousness?"

We agree that it's a whole lot more than we know. But specific Department of lunch? Department of bread and butter before bedtime? Who can watch and still get through the day? We can watch ourselves watching, but can we afford not to?

Beyond the numbers, what do they do to us? Some 15 years ago, a National Institute of Mental Health study estimated that by the age of 16, the average American has seen some 18,000 homicides on television — which works out to something like three deaths per day, exclusive of newspapers, magazines, and all. How do they shape us? Do they accentuate? Anesthetize? Mythologize? Alienate? Titillate?

What carries more clout in consciousness — the pictures we remember or the pictures we see?

These familiar, vexed questions are occasioned by the publication of The Commissar Vanishes, an extraordinary book that documents the ways that photographs were altered during Stalinist Russia. The book is the product of exhaustive research by David King, a former editor of The London Sunday Times, King's research into archival and published materials has resulted in a collection of photographs whose alterations were intended to control the public's consciousness about its leaders and how the history of the post-1917 Russian Revolution would be written.

The alterations take a variety of forms. Sometimes pictures are cropped, so a baggy-eyed Stalin in the original photograph is softened into a friendly, avuncular fellow on the facing page. The crowd's feet are gone, the darkness under the eyes lightened, the mustache turned in the hint of a smile, the eyes wanful. Stalin almost looks sexy, which isn't easy. King sardonically captions these images, "Hollywood, USSR."

And there are other kinds of enhancement. On one page Lenin addresses a sizable crowd, while on the facing page he gives the same speech to a vastly larger multitude. Many images, in fact, helped create the cult of Lenin, an agenda that served Stalin's purposes. An obviously faked photograph of Lenin and Stalin engaged in conversation in 1922 becomes a powerful tool for a long line of photographs, sculptures and graphic depictions. In these works one gets the impression of great, yet amiable minds at work, with Stalin subtly depicted as the dominant figure of the two.

There are radical kinds of photographic surgery: excisions and revisions that reflect the intrigues and purges of the Stalin period. Page after page documents photographs of political figures who were later eliminated from the pictures when they fell from power. Their faces are maimed in the often awkward photographic manipulations that turned them into chairs, trees or other props in the doctoral photographs after they were imprisoned or executed. The book's title, The Commissar Vanishes, derives from one set of such images. The original photograph shows Stalin standing beside three cronies who, picture by picture, are subtracted until Stalin stands alone in the fourth picture, ironically, some of these pictures take on the poignancy of snapshots, suggesting as they do the ephemerality of life, to say nothing of political power.

In Stalin's time, the dissemination of information and images was controlled by the state. To what extent these Orwellian objectives succeeded is impossible to say, because the inner life of an oppressed people is always difficult to gauge. While outward behavior might suggest compliance with the reigning powers, inner psychological realities and underground activities suggest different realities. There is little question, though, that some degree of indoctrination took place through images such as these. Few can fend off a steady diet of ideologically charged images, and surely this was the case for the generation of Soviet children who were born and came to maturity between the early 1920s and the end of World War II.

In Stalinist Russia, publications were carefully controlled, and a specific ideology was disseminated to the exclusion of all others, backed up by the appalling ruthlessness of the purges and the gulags. In our time, images and ideas proliferate in the West and even in Russia. We like to think that we're more sophisticated about how images (and viewers) can be manipulated. Our digitized image-world has hardened us up and made us hip. Just like Justice Stewart paging through Hustler magazine, we know a fake when we see one. Spielberg dinosaurs, Godzilla stamping New York, mobsters dying by the score, bang, bang, you're dead — we know what we're doing when we suspend disbelief.

Mr. King's research into the Russian archives is an exercise in investigating the role of photography, and photographic manipulation as it plays into the construction of ideology and history. King knows Stalin in a way that few of his contemporaries could have, and he takes evident pleasure in vitilifying him at every opportunity. Accordingly, this book is richly suggestive about the kinds of mystification that can occur as a cultural moment is lived, and as it is later reconstructed by historians.

Bearing this in mind, the book makes one wonder what some photo researcher might discover about our version of the Jom de siècle 50 years hence. Imagine a later version of the Sanitchi Brothers Memorial. Three very different pictures, and yet closer analysis reveals startling similarities.

If you enhance these pictures 40 times on your hand-digitizer, you will see that countless people in all three pictures are wearing identical symbols. In the Houston picture, room to the fourth quadrant, lower left, where a baby is wearing a shirt with the same symbol that the man next to him has on his cap. Zoom closer, tilting 75.3 degrees southwest, and notice the identical symbol on the woman's shoes. Now look randomly at the shoes and apparel of thousands of people in these three photographs and you will discover that the same symbol appearing in a multitude of guises. These "swooshes," as they were known, are virtually beyond counting, so indoctrinated are these populations. These symbols were worn throughout the social strata of the period, regardless of communism, and indeed, television archives suggest that their vogue was in part created by images of athletes caught in various stages of jumping, running and mugging for the camera. This well-orchestrated parade of images had an inculcative effect upon..."

David L. Jacobs is a professor of art at the University of Houston.

Footnotes

Sherman Alexie’s new film, Smoke Signals, is indicative of the talent that has been surfacing throughout Indian Country in recent years and making its presence known in mainstream America. Filmed on location at the Coeur d’Alene Indian Reservation in Idaho, Smoke Signals is both funny and serious, entertaining and thought provoking, surprising and expected. That the film manages to convey such contrasts is a credit not only to Alexie’s writing skills and Chris Eyre’s directing talents but also to their ability to work together to create a film totally from an American Indian perspective.

Smoke Signals is a funny film about a serious subject. You get a sense of the humor in various ways: through characters, names, through the dialogue, through the songs, through scenes. In an early scene, for example, the disc jockey asks for a traffic report from Lester Falls-Apart, who is at the crossroads in the middle of nowhere in the KREZ traffic van that’s literally falling apart. You get a good laugh at the dialogue between Velma and Lucy as they drive in reverse on reservation land and banner back and forth about drinking (or not drinking) beer or about “loving” a particular song heard on the radio. When they encounter Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, the main characters in the film, walking to town, Velma asks, “Do you guys got your passports? You’re leaving the rez and going into a whole different country.” When Thomas protests, “But it’s the United States,” Lucy quips, “Damn right it is. That’s as foreign as it gets.”

On the bus trip to Arizona, where Victor and Thomas are headed to pick up the ash remains of Victor’s father, Victor makes up a song, pow-wow style, about John Wayne’s teeth. Thomas quickly joins in the refrain, and the audience gets a big laugh about a cowboy “hero” movie star. Scenes like these keep the audience laughing, but you never lose sight of the seriousness of the film. You are constantly reminded of reservation life and the numerous issues affecting American Indians. Though the land appears desolate and the rez uneventful, it has its own special beauty; and the people have a sense of camaraderie that gets them through the tough times, such as the Fourth of July fire in which Thomas lost his parents.

It is indeed a good time to be indigenous, to paraphrase what disc jockey Randy Peone of KREZ radio tells his audience early on in the movie. It is a good time because we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in “Native” subjects: art, medicine, prophecy, writing, music, cinema. Indigenous people must take advantage of this resurgence to set the records straight about what constitutes Indianness and to remain the keepers of the stories passed down from generation to generation. Through his primary characters, Victor Joseph and Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Alexie is sending out his “smoke signals” on these two vital roles of indigenous people.

A look at Victor and Thomas is a study in contrasts about some of the stereotypical images about Indians. Victor, in a lot of ways, lives up to some of these images, and even tries to “train” Thomas on how to be a “real” Indian. “Indians aren’t supposed to smile. You got to look mean. You got to look like a warrior. You got to have some mystery like you’re in a secret conversation with the earth or something. You got to know how to use your hair you’ve got to free it.” In this brief passage, Victor’s dialogue hits on many of the idealistic views, especially from New-Agers, about Native people. Thomas brings Victor back to reality after their encounter with the cowboys on the bus who take their seats by spontaneously reminding Victor, “Jeez, Victor, I guess your warrior look doesn’t work every time.”

After the vehicle accident, Victor and Thomas go to the impound yard. Victor keeps the basketball into the refuse and muses, “A hundred years from now, some archaeologist will find that basketball out there buried in all that garbage, and he’ll think it was used to fashion some sacred Indian artifact. How some Indians have always been measured by what they’ve thrown away and not by what they’ve kept.”

Native people have kept their stories, and the stories keep the People alive. For this reason, Thomas’s role is crucial; he is the keeper of the stories, not only the funny stories but also the painful ones that Victor is loathe to hear. The journey to Arizona turns out to be more than just a responsibility to pick up the remains of Victor’s father; it becomes a trip toward self-realization and learning. Victor’s lesson is about the need for the stories for the film’s audience, the lesson is the reminder that Alexie himself states best: “We are more than just writers. We are storytellers. We are spokespeople. We are cultural ambassadors. We are politicians. We are activists. We are all of this simply by nature of what we do, without ever wanting to be.”

Just let us be.

Sherman Alexie, of Spokane and Coeur d’Alene heritage, is a talented writer whose work includes six collections of poetry, two novels and a collection of short stories. The film, adapted from his short story collection, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fights in Heaven, received the Audience Award and the Filmmaker’s Trophy at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival.

Otilia Sánchez, an active member in the Native community in Houston, is the national president of the Multicultural Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Sánchez is a board member of HCP and serves on the Multicultural Committee of the United Way.
The Diving Board

Robert Langham III

We were at 6,000 feet pushing through head-high, oak tangles on the back shoulder of Half Dome when a pack-hung brand slapped me in the face and knocked a lens out of my glasses. It was twilight and a light rain was bringing the darkness rolling down. We had been climbing hard for 12 hours; we were exhausted and beginning to think we were lost. I sat down in the leaf litter and wiped my mind to focus and considered the distraction of set goals.

Chris Johnson collapsed an arm's length away. He and I are old friends, having met in Yosemite in 1972 as students at the Ansel Adams Workshop. We returned as assistants in 1974 through 1977 and stayed in touch from then until now. Chris teaches at California College of Arts and Crafts and is known for his empathy and listening skills as well as his teaching and image making. He could come up here any time he wanted. This is my first return trip in 22 years.

We met up LeConte Gully, Ansel's route, under the north face of Grizzly Peak, up from Happy Isles, up out of Camp Curry to climb to the Diving Board. The Board is a hanging corner on the west edge of Half Dome. It is the spot where Ansel took his remarkable picture, Monolith, the Face of Half Dome. From my descent into it on a topo map by fingertip, it seems a double easy climb. But an hour ago we abandoned our second straight attempt, this time only 500 vertical feet and a quarter mile short. Now we are just trying to save our skins and get down to the main trail behind Liberty Cap without adding to the laundry list of mistakes we're trailing through the brush. Half Dome is famous for its shape. It is the Yosemite Park logo. It is one of the most famous and celebrated symbols in the world. The Mather Tower, Trango Tower and Everett are less known. But viewed from the Diving Board the famous sculptural face is unrecognizable. A black and foreboding cliff. Overhanging. From the valley with binoculars you can see it and perhaps climbers on the northwest face. It is there, between knife edge cliffs, hanging, above the Porcelain Wall. It is off the beaten path. Tourists climb the cables up the back side. Hardly anyone goes to the Diving Board.

I wanted to make the 4,000 foot climb to Ansel's perch, to walk out to theimmortal slanting pine to see what happens between man and nature. Man and music, maybe poetry, maybe nothing. Maybe a photograph. Now Chris and I are stuck in the brush and the light. Our last view of Half Dome was the hulk of the dome disappearing into the swirling mist.

One of the first books I read on photography was Nancy Newhall's The Elusive Light. It's a stay-upover chronicle of a book, one-half of a planned biography of Ansel who was portrayed in a heroic and God-like manner. It is a period piece. The publishing date, 1961, before the assassination of Kennedy, before Vietnam, before our collective loss of innocence and the tragi-clarity. Monolith was plastered on the dust jacket.

At the opening cocktail party of the 1973 workshop behind Beers Studio in Yosemite Village, Newhall balanced her drink in one hand and held her cigarette in the other while autographing my copy. She was drunk and refused to speak English to me or anyone else, preferring French. She addressed only Beaumont, who listened stonily. From the drift of what I heard through my high school french she didn't think much of work shops, me or the other students. I sat in the vapor of her breath, clutching my copy of Elusive, not knowing a cocktail from a cocktailing and praying that somebody had covered all open flames. "I'll sort imbecils, sort provincials," She tapped the ash off her cigarette and it landed on the toe of my hiking boot, glowing. I shoved the ice from my Coke, afraid that if I asked for more, I'd get it. The Newhalls had been friends with the Adams for decades. She and Beaumont had written the history of the medium. She had known Straight and Stieglitz. She edited Weston's Daybooks. She had a private parking spot at MoMA. She was a year away from a tragic and premature death. I was just some kid from Texas with a smoldering boot.

I've still got my copy with her and Adams signatures scrawled inside the cover. An appetizer looked at it once, questioning me. "This is Newhall's signature?"

"It could be in French," I allowed.

The second half never got written.

When I decided to introduce my 13-year old daughter to the West, Yosemite was the first place, and the Diving Board the first climb I put on the list.

It turns out you can step twice in the same river but you only get wet. If we had made it up to the Board, in light and on schedule, I had a comparable camera, film, lens and filters to find Ansel's viewpoint at about the same time of day. He reports his pack as topping out at 40 pounds. I weighed mine at the coffee stop, 40 pounds. I might stand in his tipped toes.

In autobiography and Examples he talks about the making of Monolith opening him up to transcending realism and moving into emotional equivalency.

In short, making the photo you feel. Regardless of what one thinks of Adams or his work you have to grant him that. He was connected.

And connection, for lack of a better English word, is the whole fight. It's the "it" of getting it. When a photographer is connected to his subject matter, the images pulse and crackle with energy. If he doesn't get connected, it's simptaxis, can't feel, doesn't see, nothing else can make up for it. Specifically in photography if you are thinking about the sexiness of the technology, the fresh air of the act, or (mostly) another person's image, you're lost. It is part of the problem humans face now that we have evolved slightly beyond our ecological niche and acquired our vaulted consciousness, (which caused more trouble than it is worth.) How do you really see what you are looking at? Anything that distracts from the resonance between the subject and artist instantly bleeds the process flat. Anyone can shoot a new and revelatory picture of Half Dome - if they can see Half Dome. If they look up at the monolith through the filter of Ansel's picture, the game is over.

I hate photographers as much as Nancy, though my French is not as good. There are too many of them. They plagiarize another shamelessly. They stampede. They flock. They have technology but not craft. Or lots of craft and no soul. If their work is good, it is distracting; it is bad, it is disgusting. They pour into the most common of artistic traps and set up housekeeping. Due to the media's reliance on subject, its practitioners fall prey to a common fault: they mistake replication for connection. I can haul Ansel's camera to Half Dome, set up the same shot at the same time of day and make Monolith. Though identical, his art and mine's not. Ansel is connected to his subject matter, monolith, while I am connected only to Ansel's image. He is creating while I am copying. And the audience knows. The viewers connection to my art can't be greater than my own connection to subject matter. It is the most common failing of photographers. (Many hoof prints lead in but few lead out...)

Nancy Newhall is right. Ill sort imbecils.

And now I have other funk to try, like getting my pants down to Lost Lake flat and on the main trail before the rain really rocks in and every bit of light is gone. We have one small flashlight and a bottle of snowmelt. The valley is seven hours away and our people there expect us now. We are in light clothing. We have no matches, neither of us smoking or entertaining a reasonable drug habit. Like any modern imbecile I am unable to perform the most basic human technological feat. I can't make a fire any sooner than I could grow a big corn out of a root. Nancy is right and I wish I had her lighter. All I have are lots of unsharable filmholders, a credit card or two and a topo map. I think Chris has designer penmanship, keen road-patch brownies and some sunflower seeds. Dinner will probably conjure up us unjudging from the seat scattered all over the route. I'm thinking high 30s tonight. Every time the mist shifts I take a bearing on Mt. Brodicker and set my headings. I may be able to navigate the dark by the thunder of Nevada Falls.

I crossed Chris up the alps and through the tangles of LeConte gully to the saddle between Half Dome and Grizzly Peak. Baby-step by baby-step. The route went quickly past skiddly to solid class V and we flashed past the point of retreat. The only way off was up.

Chris, as marathon tough and smart as he is, is out of his element on the rock faces. He's got what climbers call bad feet. They won't stick, won't edge and the exposure, having 2,000 feet of air at the small of his back, has put The Peer squarely in front of his Buddhist persona. I'm not respectful of such a moment God knows there's a hefty list of situations that would send me into catatonia, but I do my duty and keep pointing up. After about his fifth slip, I observe that his death cry, kind of a gargling whoeze, was unsuitable for one of his age and character, "My Allah Aukar," I suggested. "It's a crowd pleaser. Or maybe just Ms. Some folks say, 'Off rope!' or 'Hold my call!' We both laugh. Fear is as big a sculptor as glacial ice. It's
best to let it work. Chris is doing heavy lifting. I'm just holding the rope. After retracing from our high point yesterday I went to the Mountain Shop in Curry Village to pick up slings, rope, camalots and some black Diamond crochets. Inside the entrance in a welter of snapshots from various cliffs was a copy of Ansel's Monolith, slanting tree and all, in color, through a jammer with a slightly wider lens. I didn't take it as an omen pro or con. I just ran my thumb over it and thought, "We'll see." Now we are seeing. How in the world Ansel, Virginia, God- rid Wright and the others got up is beyond me. They were dazed. Virginia carried a stoned movie camera. The film, on video at the center in Carmel, shows the group climbing and playing in the snow. We had spent the day getting to the saddle and finally crawled out on top into the snowy poppies, snow-dog scatting up the side of the Sierras. I figured for about that time we should have dropped our packs on the banks at Camp Curry. I climbed General Harry up into the camera and set it up on the overlooking view. Ansel's party climbed here, and he said in his autobiog- raphy that he regretted leaving his camera below. In Smith County, Texas, we have landscape. This seems like Photoshopeed tourist scenery with waterfalls pouring over the cliffs, yellow leafed trees, granite glacier, and trees from a century to two back. In a world of kodak pictures it is hard to calm down enough to look around at what's there.

Yesterday our group rolled the rent-a-van up to the tunnel overlook during the afternoon shower. I set up the 3 x 7 under a paper bag, peeled my boots, changed my clothes, was prepared to shoot the faint hint of Bridal- veil Fall in the fog when all of a sudden the mist tore apart and we were looking through battlefield smoke up the valley. Chris fed me film holders while I melter and ran the shutter. A gift. When it was over all we could do was stack equipment and shake our heads over dinner. At the Ansel Adams Gallery we walked around slightly spooky. "They don't know we're here," Chris thought. Twenty years ago we were wide-eyed as- sistant and students eager for answers. Time has poured so much of my own black and white glass, that there is no longer the answer. The gallery and valley had changed little in 20 years except now the sign on the gate saying "staff only" didn't even stop the van.

And for the present moment I am just some touriast. Late on the mountain and in for a rough night. Nancy's imbicile. In a minute I'll break the problem at head down into baby steps and start getting through them. First I'll find the flashlight. Then I'll find the lens. Then a neutral grad. and the drop off of this is thickest and lead us down to a flat place on the slope, hopefully with a thick layer of darkening clouds. We'll keep an eye on it and eat, if we make it that fast, and sleep on the topo map with my darkcloth for cover. In spite of our jam no one is injured and we have a good idea of how to keep from getting stumbled by stepping and slipping. The Divide Board will be another day, perhaps.

On July 16, 1968 Chris Johnson and Robert Langham will shoulder their packs and walk out of Happy Isles for another attempt at the Divide Board.

Robert Langham is a photographer from Tyler, Texas. He is the only person ever to have been on an offer in the Ansel Adams' personal assistant, but that story could be filled in later.

The (New) Picasso Women

Harlow Tighe

The (New) Picasso Women. I know what you are thinking, but I don't mean Olga, Dora, Francoise, Marie-Terese or Jacqueline. I am referring to their current women, here, in the world. And they have no sighting to it. Picasso has greatly deflected the building. I'm talking about Anne, Helene, Jeanne, Dominiqiue, Claire and countless others at the Musee Picasso. There are the New Picasso Women, the caretakers of the Picasso legacy who laughingly identify themselves as his harem and hint at the mysterious Picasso Maladiction. Their dedication to the dead master is all-consuming, and their lives seem to become increasingly woven with his. As an extension of all else, Have they somehow been hypnotized by that infamous magnetic gaze which, almost a century later, still haunts viewers from the galleries to depths of his self-portraits?

Anne Tacker, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Gus and Lyndal Wortham curator of photography, propelled by her purposeful stride innocently walked into that timeless well of influence while in Paris in 1994. The Musee Picasso was ex- pectedly the first of three exhibitions dedi- cated to Picasso and photography. Even though that first installation received scant attention from the international art community, Anne Tacker immediately rec- ognized the enormous appeal and im- port of the collection of photographs by and of Picasso from the first years of the century. A collaboration of the two insti- tutions ensued resulting in the MFAH exhibition, The Dark Mirror; Picasso, Painting, and Photography, November 16, 1997 - February 1, 1998. The exhibition was a synthesis of the Musee Picasso's three exhibits on the subject and featured approximately 200 photographs, paint- ings, drawings and prints by Picasso. Of course, together putting any exhibit- ion requires much thought, preparation and organization. However, when a show features the most well-known artist of the 20th century, badges exploit, insurance costs soar, bureaucrats tangle, egos swell and collapse and lenders often don't re- spond to the most desperate appeals by fax, phone and Federal Express. Most large exhibits are organized several years in advance, but this enormous undertak- ing was less than a year to get off the ground. Anne Tacker, who has a noteworthy historic collection of exhibitions, articles and lectures, informed me that I was to handle many of the administrative duties of this impor- tant project, including several trips to Paris … well, let's just say I did my best to conceal any inappropriate squeals of joy in the workplace. While I had never been paid to carry my interest in Picasso, the excitement of working on such a large, international project was exhilarating and addictive. Little did I know that these were the first symptoms of the dangerous Picasso Maladiction.

My first mission to Picasso was a re- cognition of nature; the main objective was to return with a concrete checklist and firm insurance values in hand. I was to wander with the flipp- ery concepts for months to come. Nevertheless, being entranced by the potential, I dis- covered these responsibilities was nothing short of glo- rious for a young museum worker like me. I was headed off to the Musee Picasso, a magnificent villa in the heart of the Marais district that has been refurbished to house many fine exam- ples of Picasso's art as well as his personal collection and archive of photographs, letters and ephemera. Picasso was quite the gentleman.

After bumbling my way past security to the curatorial offices, I tried to get a grip on my mind and be a day-at-school nerves and take in the atmos- phere. The staff is solemn but courteous, and the library/archives seemed to be the main hub of activity. As I was talking to some of the researchers, curators and other personnel quietly go about business, it dawned on me that there were very few men around. The environment was predominately female. At the table I interpreted this as a healthy sign of female excellence in the field. Foremost among this group were curators such as Anne Balsardi and Arnaud Sentec, chief curator of the museum, and many women from the research staff who intimately know the recesses of the archives and are too only too happy to help a fellow devotee. I was told that there was a male director, but I was never to lay eyes on his (possibly mythical) person.

Only later, when I was fully immersed in the hair-pulling stress of sorting through immeasurable demands and I was so thoroughly addicted to the project that I had postponed my wedding to the loveliest but increasingly impatient Italian man, was the switch to Picasso Maladiction fully explained to me. According to the insiders (and lifetime Picasso zombies), Picasso somehow manages from be- hind the grave to attract a treaty female coterie who selflessly devote their energies to his life work and works (much as this con- cerns in life did). With that delightfully black French humor, they informed me that women often die young on the job and to my horror began ticking off the names of women who had succumbed to the Maladiction. Perhaps they were exhausted and emotionally depleted like Picasso's real wives and lovers, whose dramatic lives of violence and mental institutions and suicides? I was caught, but I was too late to go back. And as Picasso's lifetime lovers sure- ly found out, there are certain benefits to intimacy (intellectual or otherwise) with the great man. How often do you get to minutely examine unaged, naked Picassos so watch as they venerate nudes sometimes from their frames to reveal an unknown border or verso; assist curators in searches through vaults and find little- known works alongside paint private collections where magnificent Picassos hang over the couch? I did mention that during one trip to Paris I rented an apartment in the Marais district that, as it
Hansel Mieth

German-born depression-era documentary photographer Hansel Mieth passed away last February at her Santa Rosa, California, home. Ms. Mieth arrived in the United States in 1930 and became the second woman photographer after Margaret Bourke-White to be hired by Life magazine. Her work for the publication resulted in photographs that document many important and symbolic episodes of U.S. history: migrant labor camps and the 1934 cotton strike in central California, the nascent years of the welfare and social security systems, and, during World War II, the Japanese American internment camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Among her most famous images is a stark, intimate photograph of a monkey attempting to escape scientific experimentation. This photograph appeared on the cover of Life in the late 1930s.

During the 1930s Mieth and her husband, Otto Hagel, also a photojournalist, came under fire from Joseph McCarthy and the House of Un-American Activities Committee, for work perceived by some to be anti-war and anti-capitalist. This period virtually marked the end of their careers as photojournalists. The two were forced to turn to full-time farming at their ranch in Santa Rosa as a means of survival. Hagel passed away in 1973.

In 1994, the International Center for Photography in New York hosted an exhibition entitled, Hansel Mieth and Otto Hagel — A Love Story in Photography. Mieth was honored at an international festival of photojournalism in Perpignan, France, in 1996. In 1998, the first major retrospective of her work was held at the Museum of Fine Art in Santa Barbara, California.

BOOKS RECEIVED

The Houston Center for Photography receives review copies of books from publishers around the country. These books are available to visitors during gallery hours.

Harris, Mark Edward. Faces of the Twentieth Century. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988)
Herring, Jerry. Charles Siebert. (Houston: Herring Press and Houston Artist Fund, 1997)
Honey, Nancy. Entering the Masquerade: Girls from Eleven to Fourteen. (National Museum Photography/Film/Television, 1992)
Koebl, Heinz. Starke Frauen. (Munich: Kreuzeck Verlag, 1996)
Pincelli, Rosamond. Special Cases. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997)
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