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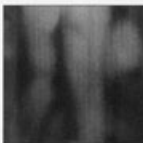
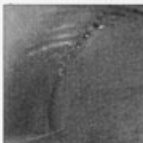
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FotoFest 1998

Johannes Birringer

Nearly 70 exhibitions surfaced at FotoFest 1998, continuing the tradition of international encounters and perspectives that its organizers have introduced to Houston over the past dozen years. Moreover, since their departure from a centralized location, Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin have pushed the boundaries of the static notion of an exhibition site considerably. FotoFest now is a month-long series of explorations into urban territories, historical buildings and vacant warehouses, communities in their relations to the city and a vastly expanded, interactive network of presenters (museums, non-

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 Sicardi-Sanders Gallery or Courret'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



Hildegart Moreno Oloarte, *Ensayo para la realidad*, photo installation [detail], 1997 (Original in color)

Staged Realities, Altered Worlds

profit art spaces, commercial galleries, corporate lobbies, restaurants). Not surprisingly, the visitor to FotoFest now needs a detailed map of the many locations where photography can be discovered and where other "happenings" and performances are encountered that expand the medium of photography and yet link image-making with new conceptions of urban development and the changing nature of our public spheres.

The politics of the festival thus break a strictly aesthetic frame; connecting the making/display of images to community projects like Project Row Houses and FotoFest's Literacy Through Photography outreach program, or to theater, fashion, skateboarders, lowriders and the entrepreneurial activities of developers and restaurateurs. Watriss/Baldwin and their collaborators have distinctly changed the status and visibility of fine art photography. The art of photography is repositioned towards engagement in civic process and transcultural exchange of ideas about how we live and how we imagine our realities at this late stage of modernity. Photography as a public art form contributes to urban revitalization; it can reflect change or mobilize identification with troubled or neglected areas of our urban community. To that effect Watriss and Baldwin have actively sought to involve players from the downtown business world and city government in their elaborate festival scheme.

ing Houston not only into a "meeting place" for photographers, collectors and curators but also into a space of experimentation, because one can exchange artworks but not their contexts of production. Unlike art biennials shaped by the commanding vision of a single curator, FotoFest thrives on collaboration and the concerted efforts of many contributors and presenters who are free to make their own choices.

In contrast with current trends in digital photography, the Slovaks don't explore computer manipulation but theatrical and ritual processes that deeply resonate with a poetic vision mixed with joyful humor and gothic fantasy.

Although museums or commercial galleries may follow predictable courses and some invited shows arrived here via established links with the Mois de Photo in France (e.g. the astoundingly beautiful photographs and book editions of Pentti Sammallahti), the 1998 festival struck me as unusually open-minded and adventur-

ous. 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 contradictions 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.



Pavel Pecha, *My Intuitive Theatre*, 1990-1997

Some of the most provocative exhibits were placed throughout downtown Houston including the Market Square

Staged Photography found a congenial environment in the cavernous warehouse off Washington Street. These richly imaginative and often surrealist photo-scenarios also set the stage for my theoretical argument here which links 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 '90s: Young Mexican Photographers*, Vine Street Studios) and straight forward photojournalism (*Stories About Us: Photographs from Juárez*, DiverseWorks).

Boundaries and genre definitions, however, cannot be so clearly drawn. The Mexican artists in particular found 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 realist representation, 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 Juárez/El Paso where *Stories about Us* was created by journalists evoking 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

the exhibition context of the medium's primarily aesthetic existence, *Altered Worlds* does not address the question at all. The title, I take it, refers to the manipulation of image content and surface, leaving the subtext open to speculation, in the same way in which we can only guess, observing L'ubo Stacho's *Infusion* installation at Wagon Works Building, what the artist's internal sources for this disturbing self-portrait may have been. Both *Infusion* and the diptychs (from the *Spiritual Journey* series) that hung on the corridor walls like ghostly clothes on a washing line, speak of the transfer of energies and imprints. The diptychs are created by pressing the print face down onto moistened cloth; the depression leaves an inverted copy, traces of image, behind, but it also affects the

Historic District and the adjacent warehouse districts. Winter Street Art Center presented works from Slovakia's New Wave photography that came to the fore in the late 1980s. Curated by Lucia Benická, founder and director of the House of Photography in Poprad, *Altered Worlds: Contemporary Slovak*

Miro Svoblik, *My dvaja a cas [two of us and the time]*, 1994-1995

paper. The deteriorated emanations of Stacho's images have a striking corporeal dimension that most other works at FotoFest lacked. It made sense that this Slovak artist was given a separate space.

The show at Winter Street offered mesmerizing works by seven younger Slovak photographers. Many studied at the Prague School of Film and Television and share an interest in staged fiction and theatrical *mise en scene*. Most of them work in color and utilize paint, pastels, mixed media and special lighting effects (luminography), and the work has the quality of carefully layered or fabricated collages.

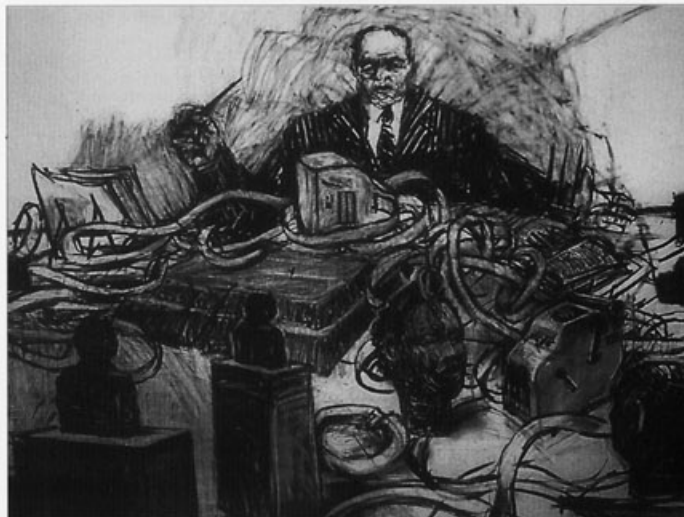
In contrast with current trends in digital photography, the Slovaks don't explore computer manipulation but theatrical and ritual processes that deeply resonate with a poetic vision mixed with joyful humor and gothic fantasy. These fantasy scenarios, as in Pavel Pecha's *My Intuitive Theatre* (the toned silver gelatin prints could also be called theatricalized landscapes) or Vasil Stanko's *Windows* and *Head* series (hand-colored silver gelatin prints), link their inherent theatrical surrealism to the dark humor we remember from Czech, Hungarian and Yugoslav films of past decades. The photographers work with actors and stage their private mythologies, but the narrative content of these theatrical tableaux remains obscured. Surprisingly, the emphasis on the subconscious and on abstract symbolism (e.g. Kamil Varga's *Spirals* series that borders on the mystical) moves the work entirely beyond its immediate political and social context; there are no allusions in these photographs to any of the momentous events that have changed the former Communist countries in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, we can surmise that such radical changes leave scars, and as the traumatic past itself loses its contours, the process of remembering is pushed more deeply into the unconscious.

And yet, like their contemporaries from Mexico, chosen from different regions besides Mexico City by four independent native curators, the young Slovak artists challenge our assumptions, not only about photography's relation to geographical and national culture/identity, but also about topical or thematic content. Content in *Altered Worlds* is defined by the compositional elements, and there are pointers, of course, as to how we can read the overtly bleak, sepia-toned landscapes in Pecha's *Intuitive Theatre*, or the imaginary neon birds that float in Robo Kocan's constructed nature (e.g. Hitchcock's *Birds* and *Disenchanted Castle*, Cibachrome

prints from 1995). The actors in Pecha's stagings seem trapped and immobilized in a script they have not written or are sick rehearsing, while Stanko's nude performers are shot in full movement. Yet the collages Stanko fabricates tend to transform the moving bodies into odd poses, splattering them like cut-outs across the black print, often upside down. The overall effect, also visible in Varga's, Peter Zupnik's, Rudo Prekop's and Miro Svoblik's

FotoFest thrives on collaboration and the concerted efforts of many contributors and presenters who are free to make their own choices.

works, is that of dream-like cartoons. Svoblik's landscape portraits merge fragmented human and animal physiognomies with natural shapes, except that the torso's extremities (*Two of us 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.

William Kentridge, *Drawings for Animated Films, Still from History of the Main Complaint*, 1989-1997

Much of the contemporary Mexican photography assembled by the different curators impressed us with a high degree of self-consciousness, not only in relation to the history of international photographic genres but, more significantly, to the stale tradition of documentary or ethnographic photography identified with Mexico's image of herself in the north. The genre of portraiture is used, but with odd twists, as in Javier Ramírez Limn's

series, *Family Reconstruction* (platinum prints, 1996), introduced by a wall text that (ironically?) promises a Freudian fantasy 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 Weinstock's series, *Under the Same Sky* (silver gelatin prints, 1994-1996), confidently restages dream-like scenes with brightly lit characters foregrounded in dark landscapes. The scenes revisit and mock the illogical choreographies of magical realism, and they appear as calculated and clever as Maruch Santiz Gómez's image-text collages that combine small black-and-white prints with proverbial wisdom borrowed from Nahuatl culture. Santiz is from the Chiapas region and presents the material objects and sayings of the local village tradition quite literally. However, the Nahuatl language and *indigenismo* attitude she uses tend to essentialize and exoticize the local culture to first world audiences. This creates the kind of irony of perception dominating those photographs in the exhibit that allude to well-worn conventions of representing indigenous culture or Mexican iconography to the cosmopolitan centers (e.g. Carlos Jurados's miniature *calaveras* and skeletons in his elegant, painterly

photo-still lives, or Daniel Mendoza's series, *San Miguel Aguasuelos*).

Maya Goded Colichio's Mexico City prostitutes undress for her camera in bleak hotel rooms. These images are a familiar sight were it not that some of the women are quite old and display an astounding sense of grace and dignity. The street-boy nudes by Pedro Slim, on the other hand, are photographed provocatively out of context (in the studio). These dark-skinned boys look straight at the camera; some pose in their jeans and strut their masculinity, yet the camera, in

stills derived from Mexican contemporary cinema, a genre continually threatened by the overbearing presence of the Hollywood industry.

Disco music is part of Hildegart Moreno Oloarte's photo-installation, *Essay on Reality* (1997). Placed in the corner of a corridor, her wall of torn, layered and distorted faces of young people has a trance-like effect, a hard-edged, unsentimental but hallucinatory evocation of today's Mexican urban youth culture. Oloarte's composition has a very contemporary feel to it. It is also convincingly inclusive, depicting the racial diversity in Mexico in its fully distorted and distorting appearance. Edgar Ladrón de Guevara's prints are stunning, blurred abstractions, giant close-ups of faces touching (*The Essential Kiss* series, 1995-1996). Other Mexican artists examine the textural surfaces of the body (animal as well as human) and, in the case of Marianna Dellekamp, its sensual and erotic immersion in water. Dellekamp's romanticism is the exception in this exhibit; most of the work of the young Mexican photographers tends to be hard edged and devoid of postmodern playfulness and cynicism. The earnest explorations and personal visions of their culture at the end of the century also avoid exploiting the mythical tradition connected with the iconography of pre-contact Mesoamerica. Rather, Laura Barrón's landscapes, from her *Paradises* series (1997), indicate a new sensibility that is symptomatic for many of the artists presented here. Hers is a purely formalist and conceptual reinterpretation of the landscape, introducing a deserted, bleak vista that contains floating signs in the upper portion of the image — computer-generated sketches of small labyrinths or ornaments that look like private hieroglyphic commentaries. I take these superimposed signs to be marks of resistance. Their presence demystifies the purported realism of the medium of photography and at the same time twists the iconic role of photography as visual-cultural memory. In these *paradises*, memory is absent. In many of the other works, it is evoked as a constructed fiction or kitsch, or it abstracts the documentary paradigm to the extent that the portraits become distorted mirrors of our own pre-conceptions 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 present their work as installations or constructions that include still photography or cinema, but the emphasis is on sculptural support (Zwelethu Mthethwa's barbershop dressing table in *Vanity at Frankies*, 1997; Pat Mautloa's recreation of the living and work spaces of migrant workers in *If You Scratch*, 1997) or on narrative dimensions proper to the time-based arts. Penny Siopsis' *My Lovely Day* is a weaving together of the artist's home movies (made by her mother, accompanied by a layered voice-over narratives mixing personal history with memories of her mother and grandmother) and an homage to a small movie house owned by her grandfather in the 1930s. The daughter of Greek immigrants, Siopsis composes a very complex visual tale of identity in South Africa, ironically distanced by the almost surreal homeliness 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

Julián Cordona, *Untitled*, from *Stories About Us: Photographs from Juárez*, 1995 (Original in color)

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 Games* that reproduces newspaper photos and truncated lines ("ordered to lie," "covering up," etc.) from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearing. Inside the room are rows of stiff wooden chairs set before a screen on which Kentridge's animated drawings are projected. Composed between 1993 and 1996 and based on his unique and painstaking technique of innumerable small alterations (adding and erasing) of a few charcoal and gouache drawings, *Felix in Exile* and *History of the Main Complaint* were perhaps the most stunning works shown at this year's FotoFest. The animated films, part of a larger series, chronicle the lives of two protagonists, the industrialist Soho Eckstein, a massive figure dressed in a characteristic pin-striped suit, and Felix Teitlebaum, a melancholy, naked figure apparently modeled upon the artist himself. A third character, a black woman surveyor observing the scene with a theodolite, appears in *Felix in Exile* and seems to stare back, like an apparition, whenever Felix looks at himself in the mirror. Sitting in his room, Felix opens a suitcase from which many pages of paper escape and float away, transforming themselves into landscapes which in turn seem to metamorphose constantly.

In a quiet and haunting manner, the films dramatize and complicate the relations of land, history, memory, guilt and forgetting, drawn in simple, starkly expressionist lines that gain their provocative complexity through the constant metamorphosis: landscapes turn into dead bodies oozing with blood, and bodies slowly dissolve into landscapes again and are erased. Eckstein lies on the operating table, and the medical CAT scans show the marks of the repressed horrors of violence. Kentridge has found a personal, metaphorical style of drawing the history of forgetting, capturing the underlying horror, frame by frame, of what the surface of the new South Africa pretends to hide in the political expediency of the so-called reconciliation process. The lines of remembering are drawn to be redrawn.

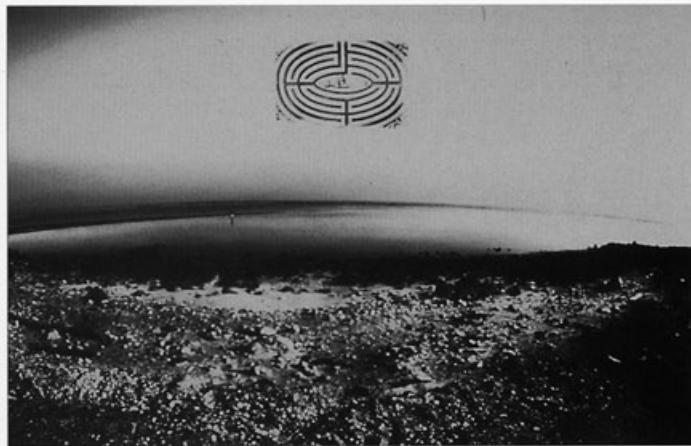
Matters are equally complex and deadly serious in *Stories About Us*, the work of a group of 15 photojournalists who live and work in the border town of Juárez, shooting for the daily newspapers. Curated by William Tuman, the nearly 60 color photos and the political context of the testimony they constitute were the subject of a recent Aperture publication,

Juárez: the Laboratory of Our Future, featuring a passionate eyewitness report by Charles Bowden. At FotoFest the images had to speak for themselves, accompanied by small captions with factual data. In addition, a panel discussion was arranged to address the facts and realities of life on an economic frontier overshadowed by unregulated growth and exploitation, low wage jobs, drug traffic, poverty, environmental pollution and violence. The panelists (several human rights activists and Jaime Bailleres, one of the exhibiting journalists) expressed their critical opinions openly, analyzing the damaging impact of NAFTA/GATT and of the new global economy on the social landscape of underdeveloped regions transformed into maquiladoras — the assembly lines of cheap labor for the powerful industrial states.

Daniel Weinstock, *Untitled*, from the series *Bajo un mismo cielo*, 1994-1996

How openly do the images speak? If it has become fashionable in 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 Julián and Gabriel Cardona's pictures of stabbed and mutilated men, or Manuel Sáenz's shot of the decomposed body of a murdered maquiladora girl, or Bailleres's gruesome close-up of a rotting face too graphic, too fantastic, or not graphic enough? Is Jaime Murrieta's photo of young street prostitutes not properly framed or out of focus? Or is Sáenz's stunning photo of Spider Man, a young masked Mexican climbing up the metal border fence at the Puente Negro to cross into El Paso for work, too dramatic and beautiful?

Stories About Us includes Aurelio Suárez Nuñez's magical nighttime photo of thousands of small lights held up during a Catholic mass in a dark cathedral, side by side with J. Cardona's bland picture of a contaminated river and Sáenz's more eerie shots of toxic fires blackening

Laura Barrón, *Paradise III*, 1997

the sky over an illegal dump or of innocent 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 wars and famines 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 Bailleres's macabre 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's

as a platform. It does not necessarily diminish the aesthetic, formalist preoccupations of art photography, but it reintroduces the truth — claims of the documentary medium at a point in time when they seemed tired and compromised by the daily sensationalist stagings of violence on television. The crucial political dimension, however, lies in the relation of the border to the U.S. mainstream imaginary. The occurrences depicted in these photos burn the skin of this country. Exploited and disposable labor, on the other side of the border river, must here be looked at not as objectified, distanced, threatening or fantastic aliens but as fragile and endangered human life: the working-class neighbor and his pregnant wife and the children from a town near you. The borders, after all, are porous, and the relations between globalized capital and localized labor will burn many of us who end up on the wrong side of downsizing. The graphic violence from the "laboratory of our future," in other words, cannot be seen as political propaganda associated with the pathology or the myth of the borderland.

Stories About Us is a passionate, dramatic, uncompromising and horrific exhibition, and the poorly paid, unknown photojournalists have risked their lives in their effort to create testimonies of the shocking normality of violence and despair they witness. Such documentation of civic disorder is not easily consumed by U.S. audiences, except if they were to continue to imagine the border as a dangerous extremity. The denial of the central history of the frontier of economic violence comes at a price, and our ignorance condones nothing. Photography, in this sense, is our most political time-based art: it continues to perform the ritual of staging what we cannot want to see. Very much like Kentridge's *History of the Main Complaint*, Pecha's *My Intuitive Theatre* or Barrón's empty landscapes, the Juárez photos play with denial. With the full strength of their allegories, they put the clown's doll on the fence, smiling at us. Yet these images from Juárez don't belong in a context where we can exchange courtesies. •

Johannes Birringer is a Houston-based choreographer/filmmaker and artistic director of AlienNation Co. His most recent performance was called *North by South*.

Jaime Bailleres, *Untitled*, from *Stories About Us: Photographs from Juárez*, 1995 (Original in color)

head stuck on a fence post, smiling at us under its big eyelashes.

The real-life 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 show to the north where its audience gets stuck in a moral dilemma. The theatrical maneuver, 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 devouring violence on the border, utilizes FotoFest

Uta Barth, *Field #21*, 1997 (Original in color)

MONUMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHS

UTA BARTH AT LAWING GALLERY
FEBRUARY 27 – APRIL 12, 1998
HOUSTON, TEXAS

William Thompson

Photography and painting have long been engaged in a lively and at times uneasy dialectic. Throughout the century, many artists have explored the rich critical territory between these two seemingly disparate media, whether they have been photographers bringing the pictorial conventions of academic painting to their imagery or painters utilizing photographic techniques in their work.

In recent years, Los Angeles photographer Uta Barth has emerged as an important figure in contemporary art whose imagery explores the relationship between photography and painting, among other issues. Barely 40, Barth has achieved international recognition for her poetic, impressionistic photographs of anonymous interiors and landscapes. Today, it is difficult to find an art magazine that does not mention one of Barth's current exhibitions, and her work is found in the collections of distinguished museums including the Guggenheim, Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney. Closer to home, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) purchased three of Barth's photographs from an exhibition at Lawing Gallery in 1996 and another major work this past April. Incidentally, these acquisitions were spearheaded not by the MFAH's photography department, but instead by Alison Greene, the museum's curator of 20th century art — one example of how Barth's work, while rooted in photography, easily

crosses over into the realms of painting and installation art.

Barth's most recent exhibition at Lawing Gallery was one of the highlights of FotoFest 98 and showed how the artist has continued to refine her signature out-of-focus technique while developing new approaches to scale and subject. The oft-quoted expression that "less is more" certainly applied to Lawing's spare installation, which was comprised of five of Barth's most recent creations: two movie-screen-sized canvases, two smaller diptych panels and a portfolio of ten prints. It takes a certain amount of daring to present an exhibition with such a relatively small number of works, but Barth's large photographs look their best in Spartan surroundings and the installation was confident in its economy. In many respects, this subdued exhibition served as a refreshing counterpoint to the geographic sprawl of Fotofest and the sheer exhaustiveness of the Rauschenberg retrospective concurrently shown at Houston's three major museums.

Barth's two monumental photographs — *Field #20* (1997) and *Field #21* (1997) — each measuring 11 feet high by 17 feet across — dominated the installation (the latter piece was acquired by the MFAH). At first glance, it was easy to mistake these enormous works for paintings, because their scale rivals that of the largest Abstract Expressionist canvases. A closer inspection, however, revealed they were actually photographic images produced using an unexpected technique. Originally created for the *Wall Project* series at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, these two photographs were printed on canvas using an industrial printer, the same device used to make billboards. In both of these works, Barth has depicted anonymous urban streets that resemble Hollywood backdrops. The artist has in fact acknowledged her interest in the moviemaking practice of filming in gen-

eric settings that substitute for specific locales. In *Field #20* and *Field #21*, buildings and streetlamps have been blurred and cropped in such a way that the images are unidentifiable and devoid of a clear focal point. Installed opposite one another in the main gallery at Lawing, the two canvases engulfed the room and the viewer's field of vision, making one feel a part of Barth's blurry, half-conscious world.

It is tempting to look for symbolism in the red traffic lights of *Field #20*, which seem to invite the viewer to stop and look at this carefully composed scene, a distant relative of Giorgio De Chirico's empty, melancholic city streets. Throughout Barth's oeuvre, there is a pronounced sense of absence and longing, and her photographs have often been described as portraits of absent subjects that leave the viewer pondering who or what is missing. On a formal level, Barth's photography resonates with the work of a number of well-known painters, from the gently illuminated interiors of Johannes Vermeer to the smudged imagery of Gerhard Richter. *Field #20* and *Field #21*, however, are more closely related to the Impressionists and, in particular, to the Pointillist imagery of Georges Seurat. Barth's two canvases, when viewed at close range, dissolve into abstract patterns composed of countless tiny dots, the result of their unique printing process. Yet from a distance, they resolve into a fuzzy but readable image, much like *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884-86) or even a color television screen.

In a more pastoral scene, Barth captured a lush, tree-filled landscape in *Untitled*, 98.4 (1998), one of two diptychs included in the exhibition. While most of the other images in the exhibition possessed an eerie sense of calm, 98.4 was, by comparison, alive with movement — leaves shiver in an unseen breeze and the contrasting size of the work's two panels adds a rhythmic quality to the

photographs. 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 (1998), Barth depicts a scene that is deathly 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 city; close to the right edge of the right panel, a thick, bright red stripe vertically cuts the foreground. The visual tension produced by this bar is striking, so much so that it evokes the paintings of Barnett Newman. Even more noteworthy, however, is the richly textured, crackled coat of red paint visible on the pole, so different from the perfectly smooth surface of Barth's photograph. Was the artist 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 print from the portfolio, she includes the partially decipherable phrase "you need and want?" In other images, Barth presents severely cropped fragments of idealized, unknown bodies 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 that are 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 indeed profoundly elegant and beautiful, they are intelligent works, firmly anchored in the present and engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the past. •

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EXHIBITIONS

FEBRUARY 27 - APRIL 18, 1998
THE TRANSCO 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 exotic 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 soprano 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 1863 and lasted until 1935. 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 visual 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 fastidious. Memory in the name of the exhibit can only be adjudicated to its curator, the Peruvian photographer Jorge Deustua; he, in turn, posits remembrance on the city of Lima. But even though Lima's epithet happens to be "thrice 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 — toned 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 (pardon the oxymoron) that 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



Eugene Courret Studio, Chess Players, Ca. 1900

Memory of a City

EUGENE COURRET



Eugene Courret Studio, A Religious Procession

the *costumbrista* imagery in the archive that suggests an interesting parallel between Courret and European travelers like Johann Moritz Rugendas and Alexander Von Humboldt. The insatiable taxonomic 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 McElroy, photohistorian at the University of Arizona. McElroy'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 Adolphe Dubreuil — 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's premise that the Courret studio — being the most expensive studio in Lima — served largely a well-to-do clientele, 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 many a costume party, the members of this elite, would jump at the chance to have their children or themselves incarnate 18th 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 1866 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 *tapadas*. According to McElroy, in the outfit of a *tapada* (literally meaning covered), "In the mozarabic 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 *tapadas* 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 Recreations* reflects well the mood 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 Melting Pot surrender of national traits for the sake of a novel stew has specific reasons that make it the exception rather than the rule. However, both processes reveal how detached national projects in the Americas were from their indigenous peoples. The resurrection of autochthonous culture in Peru would have to wait until the 1920s 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 xenophilia 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 Limeños continued to fancy French trappings. McElroy describes the astuteness 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 Evans, the Garlands, the Dubois, the Rospigliosis, the Bohms, the Gasperis, the Courrets and the Dubreils are members of colonies that behave 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 1876. 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 coolie in case he ran away. What one does see in the exhibit is many prosperous Chinese who could have possibly been liberated coolies or simply later immigrants who arrived in Peru after the sale and transport of coolies was proscribed by 1873. It is important to note that when the sale of coolies 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 between 1890 and 1919 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 like feudal lords ruthlessly exploiting indigenous peoples, Chinese coolies 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 best. In spite of their economic nationalism reflected in protectionist policies such as imports tariffs, the landed oligarchy aspired to the accoutrements 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 commandeered 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 tabletop 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 Eiffel; the building itself, was designed by the Italian architect Antonio Leonardi. For the Lima Exposition of 1872, Leonardi qua juror awarded the Courret studio a gold medal for portraits with a "Rembrandt Effect."

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



Eugene Courret Studio, Eugene Courret

partner Dubreuil — one is inclined to view Courret as somewhat Bohemian. Perhaps for that reason one may be inclined to attribute to him many motivations that might be proper of a Paul Gauguin. Curator Eduardo Pineda has dug up some evidence that places Courret in Tahiti before his arrival in Lima. Still, the actual personality of Eugene Courret remains shrouded in mystery; historiography has unraveled only some of the facts of his life but little of his idiosyncrasy. The city of Lima, on the other hand, is made up today mostly of the people who would not have been able to afford the prices for portraiture of the Courret Studio except perhaps for that thriving middle class of small entrepreneurs, no longer of strictly European descent. By and large, it was those two sectors of the population that put president Alberto Fujimori in power in 1990. What is missing in the exhibit, therefore, are the roots of what most of Peru is all about today. •

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Eugene Courret Studio, *Tapadas*, Ca. 1880

handled public relations to avoid the backlash of anti-French sentiments spurred by Napoleon's unsuccessful ploy. In the Lima Exposition of 1869, the Courret studio won a gold medal with a photographic-ly-based painting depicting the defeat of the Spanish fleet at the Port of Callao.

Some of the most astonishing images in the exhibit are those of black and mestizo wet nurses with mamíferos Euro-Peruvian infants in arms. These images are also part of that elitist European world that marginalized the "other." When *Memory of a City* was first shown in Lima in 1994, they appeared next to a clipping from the periodical *Perlas y Flechas* (1884) where black wet nurses were offered for 25 soles, zambas for 20 and mestizas for 17. The ad reflects how Peru was then and until well into my childhood years, a socially stratified world, where people, like dogs, had pedigrees that determined their function and value in society.

new immigrants swiftly displaced the more decadent landowning families of Spanish heritage. However, the newly arrived immigrants did not become integrated with the indigenous populations as the first waves of Spaniards had done. At most, they sought to marry into the families of the established landed gentry. One might venture to say that the leaders of *indigenismo*, who by and large were members of old Spanish families, when they sought to reevaluate indigenous culture, were partially reacting to the extreme Eurocentricity of the new immigrants.

A different kind of immigrant — Chinese coolies — came to Peru as indentured serfs to replace black slaves who had been emancipated and Native-American peons who had been decimated by years of exposure to disease and physical abuse. Coolies were used as cheap labor for building railways and in cotton and sugar plantations. There is a famous *carte-de-visite* (not in the exhibit) of a coolie with

Eugene Courret Studio, Adolphe Dubreuil



Angel with an Edge

Recent Work by Debbie Fleming Caffery

MARCH 5 - APRIL 8, 1998
GREMILLION & 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 Puck 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 soli-

tude, energy and focus necessary to observe and participate in the uncomfortable realm of unknown and indecipherable. Such comfortable between home, hell and all things in between feeds her clarity as well as dispassionate and instantly connected observing and filtering skills, allowing her to process the visual world she seeks as respite and sustenance, then to offer it back embraced, enhanced and intensified ten-fold.

At first glance, she appears to perceive a physical realm beyond her subjects. It is 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 miscue 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 sharp edges. She uses it to great advantage, printing big, bold and contrasty. Backgrounds are generally neutral, banal, yet subtly suggestive and referential, highly effective sleight-of-hand. Similarly, darkness and shadow define, adjust, and color



Debbie Fleming Caffery, *Untitled*, Mamou, Louisiana, 1996

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 incalculable 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 heads are bowed 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 tee-shirt 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.

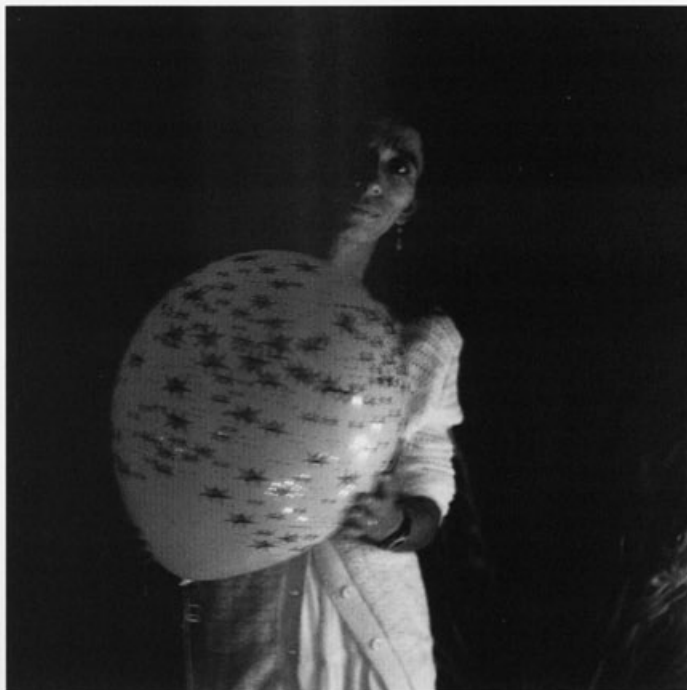
A kindred image shows a young girl from behind, her smile radiant and barely

visible. She is dancing with a powerful, more or less obsolete 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 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 tin foil crucifix tiara and wings. She struggles against the sleep that will overtake her rapt determination 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-

Debbie Fleming Caffery, *Rosa and Guadalupe*, Mexico, 1996



Debbie Fleming Caffery, *Louisiana Gator Series*Debbie Fleming Caffery, *Olinalia, Guerrero, Mexico, 1994*

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 *Día 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. Caffery'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 or 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.

Caffery 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. Caffery 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 stop 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 scared the sweet bejesus out 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. Caffery 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 Rapier is an artist and writer living in Houston.

Debbie Fleming Caffery, *Homage to Love, June 1997*

DISAPPEARING A C T

Joan Seeman Robinson

FEBRUARY 13 – MAY 17, 1998
THE MENIL 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 Rauschenberg¹

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-spattered 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 shelved, 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 'Bob.'"²

With Susan Weil, his wife in 1950, he made *Untitled* [double Rauschenberg] by pressing his nude body on photosensitive 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 upending another, as if birthing a second self from the single "Janus" head they share.

These life-size blueprints record the artist at work, exploring alternative roles, innovative strategies transient substances, his fascination with light and shadows and with darkness itself. In 1951 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, expunging from them any evidence of his handiwork. John Cage likened 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 provocative works, one white and one black. Arranged at right angles to each other, their receding diagonals point to his seated figure at the center.

Strong diagonals are prominent in other early photographs — dramatic signs of the absence of bodies. In *Quiet House*, 1949, (in memory of the death of Mark

The ghost of Rauschenberg's presence inhabits many more of his photographs. It's as though Albers' 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 overtaken

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 twosomes — the elegant horses over the west facade of St. Mark's (and a shadowy third), and the bell ringers high above them, astride the bell tower. While in Rome, Rauschenberg stationed Twombly in profile between colossal



Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, (self portrait, Black Mountain), ca. 1952



Robert Rauschenberg, *Charleston Window*, 1952

Drier, son of Theodore Drier and nephew of the famous art patron, Katherine Drier) slanting beams of light work powerfully to warp the frame of a ladder-back chair. In *Man with Two Souls*, his tilted camera throws the talismanic (some say phallic) assemblage of two light bulbs and a shaft into precipitous decline, as if challenging his surrogate. "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 sheen and shadow — reflected light across the glistening 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



Robert Rauschenberg, *Bob & Cy, Venice*, 1952



fragments of the 4th century statue of Constantine the Great, orienting him toward Constantine's jutting finger and tall column on the right — projecting him into a prestigious classical context. In a sequence of four more images Twombly descends steps until confronting the camera, his head deleted for a selective emphasis on the advancing grey torso as it gradually supplants the spatial recession of the stairs.

Then Rauschenberg explores the Flea Market, where he focuses on an old muffled automobile, its rear window peering out above shrouds of crusty tarpaulins. Another car, its bumper bent into a soft arabesque, is graced 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

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.³ Inspired in this case by the primitive surroundings and the raw materials collected when he and Twombly visited North Africa, these modest boxes house bones, rags, dirt, mica, 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 presonali resonate with private references, the boxes distinguishing each from the other, as if episodically. The composition of the overall photograph recalls Matisse's *The Red Studio* in which paintings and sculptures, a precious compilation of his aesthetic interests, are arranged on a red ground that is faintly delineated as the area of his studio. They sufficed 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 uncovering what is hidden, but which, when disclosed, just becomes more elusive.

Note how Rauschenberg photographs another group of fragile assemblages, the *Fettici Personali* or "hanging fetishes,"

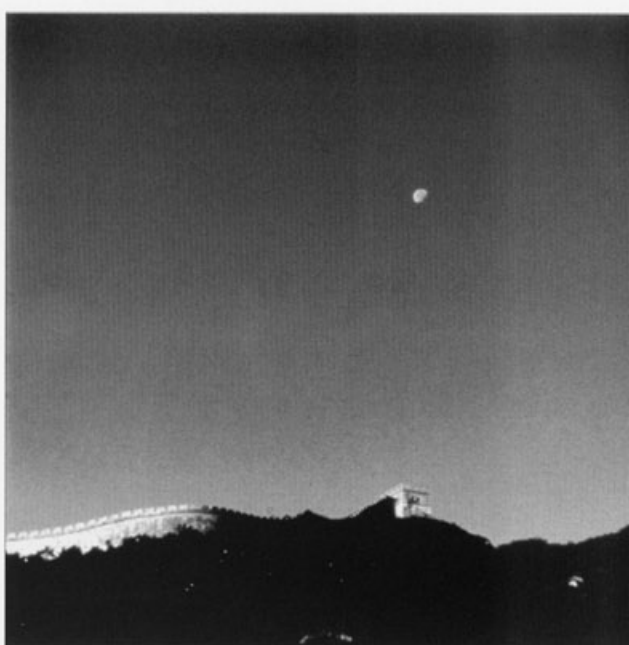
or tribal appendages — in pointed contrast to his congratulatory equation of Cy Twombly to the late classical likeness of the Roman general, Constantine.

Rauschenberg's photographs of windows and doors and of hanging fabrics such as shades and towels and tantalizing panels suggest their emblematic value as passages from outside to interiors, and the discrete shielding of things deeper within. Assuredly, Rauschenberg prefers planar treatments — the alignment of his subjects in blunt accordance with the face of his papers and canvases — but the allusive power of such features as ladders, walls, windows, doorways and curtains when emphatically frontal also stimulates our imagination. The screened doorways and windows surrounding the black paintings aren't there just to establish the scale of the works propped amidst them, nor do they merely amplify the architectonic infrastructure of these paintings; they are inherently discursive and integral to other works in which Rauschenberg divested his photographs of his obvious presence. For example, in *Sneakers*, 1952, his presence is equally equivocal. The toes of his worn shoes appear at the bottom as if he is walking a weathered plank, but the grid-like arrangement of the trued timbers and the adjacent areas of concrete also reads vertically as if the sneakers have been removed from his feet and affixed to a wall.

On his later world travels, his attention to the discarded, the humble and the outdated is pervasive. He remains fascinated with conjunctions of objects which become perplexing when isolated, and he is fundamentally observant of strict parallel planes, using curves and counter diagonals to contradict rather than reinforce the illusion of depth.

Finally, there is a touching concordance of a particular pair of early and late photographs affirming his formal sophistication, and which, iconographically, traces his passage from youth to full maturity. In *Charleston Window*, 1952, Rauschenberg looked up at a wrinkled shade, visible through a dark screen, its torn edge a fragile border after long years of use. On his trip to China in 1983 he photographed the *Great Wall* from a distance as a ribbon of light whose serpentine shape gleams beneath a blue sky. Matter and space are reversed in these two images as if they were positive and negative ways of rendering a single perception. The frayed shade drawn over the black interior and the massive black mountains rising toward the lucid sky represent the breadth of a field of vision that never seems impersonal. •

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Robert Rauschenberg, *Chinese Summerhall (Wall)*, 1983 (Original in color)

reportage." In another shot, a standing man peruses a book while displaying his wares — racks of eye-glasses — which seem to address us as we survey them.

The *Scatoli Personali* (personal boxes), 30 of which he arranged and photographed on the floor of the Pensione Allegli in Rome in 1953, are, by title and purpose, surrogates for the artist. As a child in the coastal city of Port Arthur, Texas,

suspending them on moss-laden tree limbs in Rome's Pincio Garden. (They recall the contemporaneous surrealist photographs of another Gulf Coast photographer, Clarence John Laughlin of New Orleans, in which dead birds, fragile laces and mortuary memorabilia conspire to call forth both the underworld and the afterlife.) In one instance Rauschenberg draped one of his "personal fetishes" from a portrait bust as if ritualistically bewitching and adorning it with occult

FOOTNOTES

1. Barbara Rose, *Rauschenberg*. New York: Vintage Books, 1987. All his quotations were derived from this interview.

2. Ibid.

3. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*. Houston: The Menil Collection, Houston Fine Arts Press, 1991.

Emotional Landscapes

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

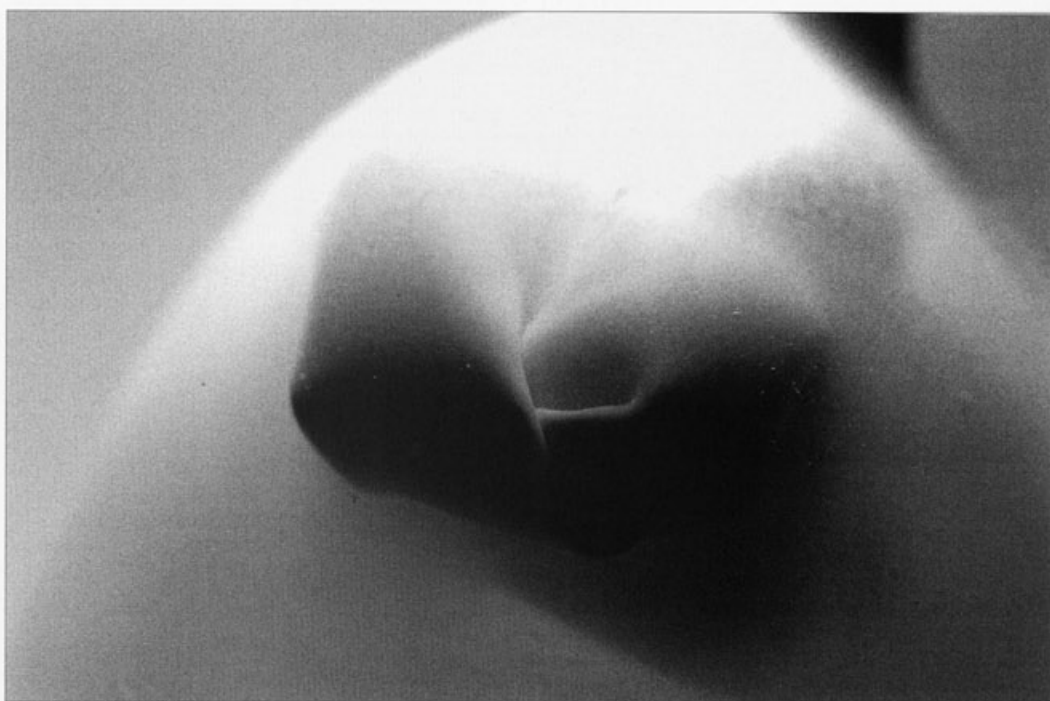
Johannes Birringer

"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 notes in my rehearsal book, 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 gropes in the dark as each movement must be found again or felt again before it can be seen or moved on stage.

Hans Staartjes is a photographer whose work I never quite knew very well, although I did meet him in the theater, in the late 1980s, and we have exchanged notes over the years. He knows my dance work and has photographed it, trying to shoot the movement without documenting 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-objective and the non-expressive. If there is a modernist equivalent to pure dance in photography, I imagine it to be such striving 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 extremities or fantasized 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 literally 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 Pentti Sammallahti (FotoFest 1998), had removed his silent landscapes of the icy northern nights, is a revelation. The impact of the exhibition for me lies in its subtle internal contradictions. The photographs have surfaces that are immensely 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, Staartjes has now inscribed them with allusions to geographical, geological or psychological layers, layers of the imagination that are states of being and becoming, in flux, frozen and yet pulsating with intimations like the cooler wind that arrives with the evening.

Back in January Staartjes participated in a performance "happening" I staged at the former Mercado del Sol, now an architectural ruin awaiting its resurrection. In a 3,000 square-foot space on the fourth floor, Staartjes positioned eight prints from his *Flesh* series on the floor, gently leaning them against the pillars that sup-



Hans Staartjes, *fold*, 1997

port the roof. In the dark, vacant space of the haunted building, these photographs seemed to emit their own light, as if yielding 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 monochromatic Calder mobile suspended upside down.

In these months before *New Emotional Landscapes*, Staartjes seemed to take stock of the process he had undergone in the mid-1990s when he enrolled in the sculpture department at University of Houston.



Hans Staartjes, *ridge*, 1998

He was a self-taught photographer who had begun working in the darkroom in 1976, after graduating in philosophy from a British university. Staartjes established his reputation as a Houston-based fine arts photographer in the late 1980s, when he was selecting diverse objects and materials as his sources, including found objects or fragmented scenes photographed from the TV screen (in *TV Evangelist*, 1989). After *Televisionary Manifesto* (shown during FotoFest 1992), his interest in abstraction came to dominate his work, yet he followed a very personal path of research during the following years. He delved into etchings and

photogravures and then built his own resin sculptures, participating in group shows in which he would exhibit the three-dimensional sculptural objects side-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, surrealist constructions when I saw them in the studio, are absent. The focus is entirely on the 16 x 20 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 ridge* and ends with four extraordinary, perplexing photographs: "*awaiting release, the stretch, fold and rhythm of erosion* 2. A number of photographs in the show invite anthropomorphic 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 thinking 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 photographed 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 *awaiting release*

a thin, bright white rivulet pours down from the top, creating a zigzag line before fading. Staartjes's images create fields of the subconscious, I get lost in momentary reverie. No shape really imposes itself here, but I can follow a curve or a roundness to where it loses all definition and become pure gray tones.

Like the pigmentation of skin, changing with age or exposure to light and sun, the textures resonate with deeper implications. The human body, its fleshliness, vertebrae, cavities, protrusions, ligaments, inner organs and, above all, its skin membrane, is hinted at. But the work encourages the mixing of metaphors, and spinous 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. Staartjes holds back deliberately, as if wanting to avoid any literal reference to concrete physical body shape or, worse, to fashionable contemporary obsessions with body politics and sexualities, the obscene or abject 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 suggestiveness 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 phantasms 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 Staartjes's photographs creates a distinct aura or emanation, not one associated with distance (sight) but with proximity (touch) and sensual boundary-surfaces. These highly physical images, manually produced after a laborious process of lighting 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/filmmaker based in Houston.

Luis Mallo: Through a Glass Darkly

JUNE 11 - JULY 8, 1998
SICARDI-SANDERS GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Ileana Marcoulesco

It is strange how, at the end of this century, photography is still considered to be "photographic art," optically realistic imagery. It is of course only a "question of taste," prevalent though it may be; but for this very reason, it should not be mandated, imposed, preached, universalized.

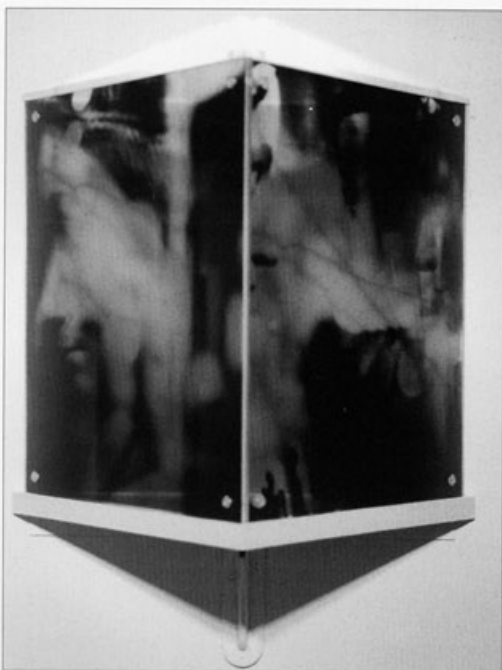
Photography as a medium is a complex set of procedures for manipulating light whereby another reality than what the ordinary visual sense can provide is presented to our attention, as if created ex nihilo. Nobody denies that reportage photography is a medium of discovery/uncertainty of aspects in the world not seen or only heard of before and that it is a powerful tool for social knowledge, ideological persuasion, moral instruction, let alone for sheer visual delight and that it is here to stay.

Yet paralleling 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-representable, non-figurative (not necessarily abstract) image. In Luis Mallo we encounter, this other version of photography, pushed to the extreme, as conveyor of intimate, if nebulous, feelings merely occasioned by objects as support for meditation — sometimes metaphysical, sometimes psychological. It is an art of allusion barely geared at the referent but far more apt at revealing the subject's feeling of inadequacy vis-à-vis perceived reality.

In the case of the *Reliquarium*' the objects were mostly classical or medieval sculptures from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. They occasioned a peculiar feeling transmuted into a chiaroscuro so intense as to project us into a world of myth.

Mallo's is an ambitious attempt at translating philosophical meditation in its eternally critical aspect into images — or lack thereof — at fighting once more, and variously, the illusionistic fallacy. His images are not easily penetrable, joyful explorations or discoveries in the realm of visual form. On the contrary, they are sorrowful and even anguishing reflections on the deficiency of our beliefs in the solidity of perception. What you see, even when surrounded by great art, is not the is-ness of things, and we are forever condemned to err on the side of taking appearances for truth.

Roland Barthes speaks of "traumatic photographs," in front of which language has to be silent. He had in mind worldly catastrophes: fires, shipwrecks, violent deaths, captured "from life as lived." About these, there is very little to say; the shock speaks of itself. Barthes enunciates then a kind of imaginary law: "The more direct the trauma, the more difficult its connotation becomes." ² Couldn't it be, though, that an artist will experience inner catastrophes: of doubt about knowledge or the truthfulness of perception, of



Luis Mallo, *Reliquarium. Untitled Case I, 1998.*

uncertainty about artistic vocation, about what it is that one is doing while photographing: trying to show, trying to convey? This sort of crisis is not an idiosyncratic attitude affecting some disturbed individuals. I believe it is endemic to whomever, in the field of creative arts, tries to think, be truthful to oneself, authentically make sense. The difficulty here is much rather with denotation than connotation. For, given the obscurity and veiledness of Luis Mallo's takes of mirrored artifacts, what is being represented becomes uninteresting, if not outright useless.

Barthes also spoke repeatedly of a photographic message and the ways of encoding/decoding it. Avowedly, it is in the nature of any human communication to deserve deciphering. Perhaps, however, Mallo's mature style purports not to communicate but to half-reveal, half-conceal, barely suggest a remnant of meaning. It is the sheer conveyance of a pessimistic mood that colors or discolors our most precise views of objects and experience of events.

The parameters of classical photography, categories like valid contrast, clarity, sharpness of focus, high resolution, the abundance or paucity of detail, the vividness or dearth of ideas, count for little. I contend that they are part of the realistic illusion which Mallo debunks without being properly abstract. Neither realism nor abstraction, certain minds or souls are apt at recognizing, and being moved by, another version of form. Mallo's pictures are far from abstract even though one may easily connect them (and is also invited to do so, by the subtitle of a series in the show — *Inside the Cave*) with Plato's doctrine of Truth, as expounded in *The Myth of the Cave* (Book VII of *The Republic*). Now, if anything is not, or is only incipient, abstraction in philosophy, it is this cornerstone piece of philosophizing, a myth or a story that has ruled centuries in the western European tradition and found an echo in all cultures which had an access to it. The gist of Plato's theory of truth as contained in the *Allegory of the Cave* is that we will forever be sent back from the light of the sun into the miserable cave that we perform inhabit. We would be in a sense fortunate to see and compare shadows. Mallo's work is primarily composed of shadows: delicate profiles, round faces, square jaws,

closed eyes of the statuary, regular but dead hairlocks of an angel, Plexiglas boxes encasing heads from three angles. One notices that the glimmers are artificial; they are mirrored effects from metals or windows while the penumbra truly invades every single object as its natural medium.

The Allegory of the Cave tells a story. Men are hypothetically portrayed as living in a cavernous space that has an entrance to the light at one end and a tunnel leading underground at the other. Chained so that they cannot move, all these

man can see are the shadows that a fire located above the ground helps produce on a wall standing in front of them. Their world is reduced to that of moving shadows thoroughly scrutinized and commented upon. Suddenly released from their chains, Plato further hypothesizes, some of these men would turn around, be blinded by the sun's light and nonplused by the shapes of things which they had never seen before. They would consider themselves utterly happy for a while. Yet forced to go down in chains once more and able to look again only at shadows in a darkness to which they would hardly readapt, they would curse the moment of truth experienced before and would never advise anyone to undergo such a frustrating experience. With this, the story ends. The true things seen in the light of the sun are, in Plato's theory, the blinding ideas; the sun embodies that which makes them possible, the Idea of the Ideas — the Idea of the Good.

After World War II, Martin Heidegger gave an illustrious reinterpretation of this allegory.³ According to him, Plato's story would have a paideic meaning: to show how men get educated throughout life into looking at truth. At some stage of this education process, they can see only shadows and take them for the only unhidden thing, for truth itself. More truth is reached at the second stage when they are released from their chains! At the third stage, the same men can walk out into the open and see things more essentially. Yet not before they will turn towards the source of light in an inversion of their previous stance will they attain the veritable truth. In this fight for life or death, some (even Socrates) are bound to succumb. Heidegger's brilliant yet tortuous argument concludes in saying that most of the time, being in the light of truth, far from access at an ultimate illumination through ideas, is inextricably linked with being caught in the shadows of the cave.

Those who revel in so-called Cartesian clarity and the infinite versions of "realistically reproduced reality" will have trouble with this interpretation. Yet here is an artist — not a reporter, activist or even an aesthete — who, while borrowing the platonic metaphor of the cave, does not see truth or unhiddennes (aletheia) in a glorified ascensus towards the realm of ideas. Rather, he remains stubbornly caught in this "lower" degree of truth and

beauty that is the photographic chiaroscuro, where shadows, manipulated by mirrors, walls, partitions and frames, offer all there is to see, to know. A pessimistic and utterly un-Platonic view of things, yet an enchanting approach, for it relieves the viewer from the obligation to judge the truth of things as useful, telling, instrumental, good or bad, according to socially acceptable values. At the same time, it depicts at least one facet of the human condition that of having to intently gaze into the obscure, the effaced, the seemingly worthless residue, to dwell in more than uncertain ways on this planet. There is no correctness in this view neither "photographic" nor political. Mallo preaches no right way of looking at things in their unhiddennes or truth, no infallible viewpoint, no privileged abstract or perspective approach, if not veiled or indirect.

There is enormous deliberation in these takes of half-profiles of persons, in the semi-opened windows and doors, among barely intimated facets of columns, contours of familiar objects of furniture, and blurred gauging of lapidary volumes. It speaks tomes about uncertainty, blurredness and even the blindness of ordinary perception.

Very few of these pictures lend themselves to even minimal description. No. 1 is an almost hideously symmetrical head with the conventional locks of an angel and a dead expression, floating amidst fluted columns and light pipes of an invisible organ; some symbol for truth and beauty, subverted, however, by each subsequent image. I found No. 35 which catches part of a bedroom with a richly carved period bed in juxtaposition to a spot of blinding light coming from a rectangular window, particularly "familiar;" the glimpse of a comfortable sleeping place wrested from its lavish security by the crude, invasive morning light as a cruel reminder of diurnal duties.

In No. 41, half a statue projects a full size shadow and appears as a veiled figure inside the tridimensional enclosure of a cage as if explicitly showing how a majestic outside statue is transformed into a shadow by the rigid limits of our spatial perception! No. 45 shows two pairs of plump feet of different sizes engaged in a rhythmic dance or walk, letting you guess whose union was thusly marked.

Mallo did not want to append a "parasitic message" to his images by giving them individual titles. This may pose a difficulty for the spectator or the critic. But in the final end, the decision is justified. Not only do the numbers indicate a progression in depth, but they also emphasize the futility of deciphering, the difficulty interpreting, or, in quasi-mathematical terms, the fuzziness of our perceptual sets. •

Ileana Marcoulesco is a freelance philosopher and art critic who is presently curating a surrealist show for the Menil Collection.

FOOTNOTES

1. Reliquia in Latin means remains, with a shade of pious remembrance as in relics of the saints, miraculously preserved and therefore worthy of veneration. I would claim, however, that in spite of the title, one should not too quickly attribute religious meaning to these enigmatic works. Mallo's photographs are not sacred relics but residues from the perception of classical artifacts, traditionally consecrated in the Museum as Ideal Beauty.
2. Introduced by Susan Sontag. *The Photographic Message in: The Barthes Reader* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1982, pp. 209-210).
3. Plato. *Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Francke, Bern, 1947, pp. 5-22).

SLEEPWALKING

A BRONX FAMILY ALBUM:

THE IMPACT OF AIDS

BY STEVE HART

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 wend 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 1995. I'm no hacker, but I'm working with reasonably current if not cutting-edge equipment and programs, am comfortable with and know my way around them. Yet it took me hours to get this CD-ROM up and running in order to explore its contents. I tested it on three machines. First I had to install an updated 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 supercharged Mac Power PC clone. But, for some reason I haven't figured out, my comparative clunker of a Mac Performa 637CD plays it just fine — except 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 auditorium full of people — unlike a book. There's a politics to that as well which also must be acknowledged.

"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 1993 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 storage and retrieval system for large amounts of material in different media (images, video, sound files, text files), 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 as programmed while 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 sidebars — 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 I-talk-you-listen, which means that the project's sub-subtitle, "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 "transference," a precise diagnostic term, is rendered confusingly here as "transparent." Ralph's recollection that as a young shoe-shine boy in Puerto Rico he was "smoking weed — pot" has been transmuted into the incomprehensible "smoking wheatpuff." Many such garbled mistranscriptions were in the sampling of the interviews to which I

speaking, this CD-ROM doesn't move us much further than Pedro Meyer's *I Photograph to Remember* (1991) or Lewis Baltz's *The Deaths in Newport* (1995). Fact is, it doesn't allow the user much more "interactivity" than your average printed photography monograph with text.

This isn't said to impeach the substance of the material incorporated into this project. But I do think we need a better, less "bottom-feeding" working definition of interactivity, one that involves a lot more than deciding whether you want to look at photos or listen to recorded interviews first, one that really engages the user in the process of constructing the way the material is organized and presented.

One final consideration regarding technical qualities: the transcribing of the interviews appears to have been done by someone with a less than firm grasp of punctuation and a tin ear for Hispanic and middle-eastern accents. Also, no one seemed to have bothered to read the

listened while reading their print versions. Errors 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



Steve Hart. *A Bronx Family Album*, CD packaging

THROUGH HELL

project: Hart's photographic narrative and the contextualizing material with which he's surrounded it.

In 1990, Hart befriended and began to photograph and otherwise track the lives of "Ralph and Sensa, 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; Sensa was crack-addicted, Ralph an ex-junkie. Hart

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 rivets 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. One senses his emotions right below the surface of his words, and he clearly had to work hard to keep his account of their complex, ongoing crises from submersion in either mawkishness or

They seem to know no one and to do nothing, day in and day out. Are they so isolated and inert 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, lethal biosphere, inexorably imploding 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 Sensa 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, Sensa, 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, no single voice challenges their 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 these choices of behavior not only on other consenting adults but on their defenseless offspring and society at large. In this ethically neutralized context, they gradually come to constitute the epitome of a stereotype: the archetypal family of color on welfare, doing drugs, spreading AIDS, rutting like bunnies and popping out babies, generations without end, amen. Let's pray that Rush Limbaugh never gets his hands on a copy of this; he'd have a field day with the evidence Hart provides in support of the right's cartoon version of reality.

I can understand Hart's decision to remain nonjudgmental about all this insofar as the family is concerned; that was probably necessary, as an unstated precondition, even a mindset, for this project to be possible in the first place. (What family would let a preacher hang around to censure them?) Yet, aside from the family members' angers at each other, no one here (including the outside observers) blames anyone for anything, including the system and themselves. They don't even seem particularly upset about any

of it, just sad, and resigned, as if they were all doomed to sleepwalk through hell together. Perhaps we, as viewers, need to think of everyone involved in this project — the family's adults and children, of course, but also the representatives of the various healing professions and social services, and even Hart himself, a hapless if eloquent onlooker — as participants in some dreadful co-dependent nightmare to which none of them can foresee any end.

There's nothing here from anyone to apportion responsibility, suggest guilt or contrition, propose alternatives or effect change. That no one in that larger family — the dysfunctional "family" of all those whose opinions are heard on this CD-ROM — seeks to terminate or prohibit anything described therein or intends to intervene in any way or even disapproves vehemently and unequivocally of any of it leaves this viewer, at least, adrift in an amoral microcosm whose fatalistic, apolitical assumptions sap the empathy Hart's account evokes initially and frustrate the intellect by proposing no accountability, no causal analysis and no strategies for change.

This project's strengths lie in its longitudinal approach — that seven-year commitment is exemplary — and its wealth of contextualizing material, plus its exploratory (even if simplistic) use of a new medium which may bring it to new audiences. Its weakness is its failure to take a stand of any kind on anything. Does Hart actually believe that there's no one here — from Ralph and Sensa right on up to the federal drug czars, from the local crack salesmen to the corporations that profit off the existence of an unemployable, permanent underclass — with anything to answer for? What are his positions and his politics? If he truly wants to make something happen, rather than merely ensure the continuation of this heart-breaking story and its countless counterparts, he needs to look back at some of his form's problematic models — W. Eugene Smith, Lewis Hine, even old Jacob Riis, moralists and polemicists all, whatever their flaws — and ask, as they did, "Who profits?" And then lead us to their door and point an accusing finger at them, as Smith and his wife Aileen did in their classic *Minamata*. That is, he must develop his capacities for investigative journalism, learn to locate his own capacity for outrage and condemnation and somehow put them all where his eyes and heart already are. •

A. D. Coleman is executive director of *The Nearby Café*, a multi-subject Web site at www.nearbycafe.com where his interactive newsletter, *C: The Speed of Light*, can be found. *The Digital Evolution*, a collection of his writings on digital imaging and electronic communication from 1967-1998, will be published this fall by Nazraeli Press.

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Sweet Sorrow



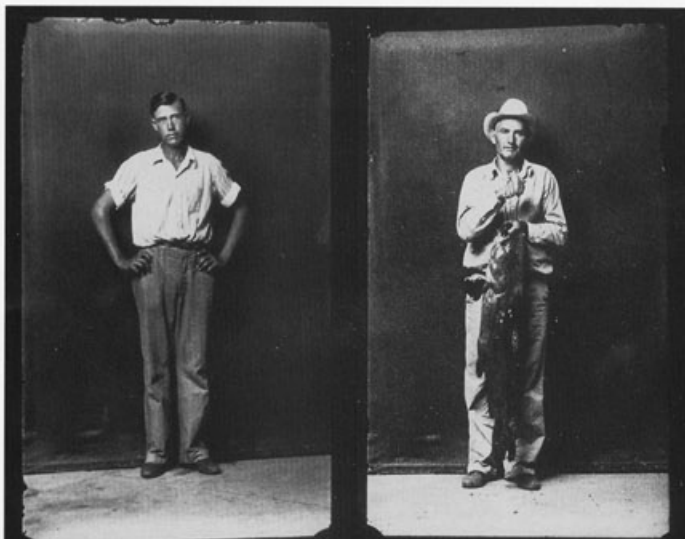
DISFARMER:
HEBER SPRINGS PORTRAITS 1939-1946
TWIN PALMS PUBLISHERS
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO, 1996

By Peter Brown

It is safe to say that Mike Disfarmer was a very odd man. Sometime during mid-life he broke off communication with his family, the Meyers, rice farmers who lived outside the small town of Heber Springs, Arkansas. He also broke with the Lutheran church — a self-imposed ostracism of sorts in this family-oriented Bible-Belt town, and he drank, though Heber Springs after the mid-1940s was dry. While apparently not unpleasant, he was virtually friendless. Strangest of all, he took on the name of Disfarmer, convinced inexplicably that a tornado had carried him away as an infant and had deposited him with a family not his own. He was not a Meyer, he maintained — a German word that he mistranslated as “farmer” (and an occupation he abhorred) but a “Disfarmer” instead. Legally changing his name, he took up photography.

His main connection to Heber Springs then, and an ironically intimate one, was through his work. Mike Disfarmer, the Boo Radley of his world, the oddball bogeyman of Heber Springs, still managed to photograph anyone who came through his studio doors — and people came, from Heber Springs and beyond, by the hundreds — on occasion lined up down the block. These portraits haunt me.

They are straight-forward and plain yet at the same time almost claustrophobically creepy in a surface lushness of



wrinkles, sun-bleached cotton, shining skin, military garb, clean farm clothes and Sunday dress-up, all set against the sparest of studio backdrops. While one cannot finally know, the photographs seem, on evidence of expression and posture, to be truthful: open-faced depictions of a small American town at a specific time. In them there is a steadiness that pulls one back, right back into that Main Street studio, back across all those miles of culture and time.

When a daguerreotype is opened, it uncases a world, and a soul from the deep past peers through a century into the present, questioning and strangely alive. Disfarmer's photographs produce the same secret, disquieting sensation in a viewer — one of a shared seriousness, of intimacy with the distant and the dead. The photographs are too stark to be sentimental and the people in them too vulnerable to put one off. Disfarmer's subjects simply look out to us as we look in. As the pages are turned and the book

eventually closed, one is left with a strange lack of resolution as though those photographed will not quite go away.

The book's design by Jack Woody is remarkable. A few descriptive points: the book is small enough to be easily held but has the heft of something serious. The cover is black with a young girl on the front and an old woman on the back. The pages are a matte black. The photographs are small, contact prints from the original 3½ x 5 inch glass plate negatives. And there are many: page after page of old people, soldiers, mothers, fathers, farmers, young men and women, brothers and sisters, girlfriends, high school kids, little boys, men with large fish, little girls, babies. And on and on. There are no words beyond the title of the book until one has experienced the vast majority of the photographs, at which point, Julia Scully's text answers most of the questions that one might have.

There is something both exhausting and exhilarating about this procession.

Exhausting in that one must look closely and think hard; exhilarating because here, if one takes the time, is a town. We fill 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 visions 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 unsaid words — the gossip, jokes, tragedies, crops, weather, crimes, holidays, pioneer paths and family histories — all those incidents that describe these lives and at some point led these people first to Heber Springs and then to Mike Disfarmer's homely 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 those pictured in the photos either 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 hovering in the background is the photographer, this strange Mike Disfarmer 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 look 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. •

Peter Brown is a Houston photographer, writer and teacher. His book on the Great Plains, with an introduction by Kathleen Norris, will be published by DoubleTake/Norton next spring. An excerpt appeared in the Winter 1998 issue of DoubleTake.

Photographic Surgery

THE COMMISSAR VANISHES
BY DAVID KING
NEW YORK: HENRY HOLT,
1997

David Jacobs

"How many photographs have you seen today?"

First day 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, driver's licenses, magazine covers and newspapers, TV, movies.

After a while, "How many did you see that you didn't know you saw?"

"Huh?"

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

We agree that it's a whole lot more than we know. But specifics? Dozens before lunch? Hundreds before bedtime? Who can watch and still get through the day? We can't 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, movies, magazines and all.¹ How do they shape us? Do they acculturate? Anaesthetize? Mythologize? Alienate? Titillate?

What carries more clout in consciousness — the pictures we remember or the pictures we don't?

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-Russian Revolution would be written.

The alterations take a variety of forms. Sometimes pictures are airbrushed, so a baggy-eyed Stalin in the original

photograph is softened into a friendly, avuncular fellow on the facing page. The crow's feet are gone, the darkness under the eyes lightened, the mustache turned up in the hint of a smile, the eyes wistful. Stalin almost looks sexy, which isn't easy. King sardonically captions these images, "Hollywood, USSR."

And there are other kinds of enhancements. 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 the source 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 fates are mimed in the often awkward photographic manipulations that turned them into chairs, trees or other props in the doctored 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 stomping 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 vilifying 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 *fin de siècle* 50 years hence. Imagine a later-day King, given access to the negatives, proof sheets and memoranda of TV networks, ad agencies or political parties, writing something like the following in the year 2050.

"The first picture was made in Houston at a baseball game, a popular sport in the middle of the 20th century that began to decline in the 1980s. The second picture was made on Fifth Avenue around the same period, when the avenue now famous for audio equipment was a fashion center. And the third is on Piccadilly Circus. Notice the old statue of Admiral Nelson, which, of course, was replaced long ago with the Saatchi 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, zoom 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 37 x 53 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 economic station, race or creed. 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 incalculable effect upon ..."

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

FOOTNOTES

1. David Jacobs, *The Art of Mourning: Death and Photography, Afterimage* (Summer, 1996), pp. 8-11.



Otilia Sánchez

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'Alène 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 dialog, 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 dialog between Velma and Lucy as they drive in reverse on reservation land and banter 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 resurgent 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

Reserve the Best for Last *Smoke Signals*

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 dialog 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 gently 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 drop-kicks the basketball into the refuse

and muses, "A hundred years from now, some archeologist will find that basketball out there, buried in all that garbage, and he'll think it used to be some sacred Indian artifact. How come Indians have always been measured by what they've thrown away and not by what they've kept?"

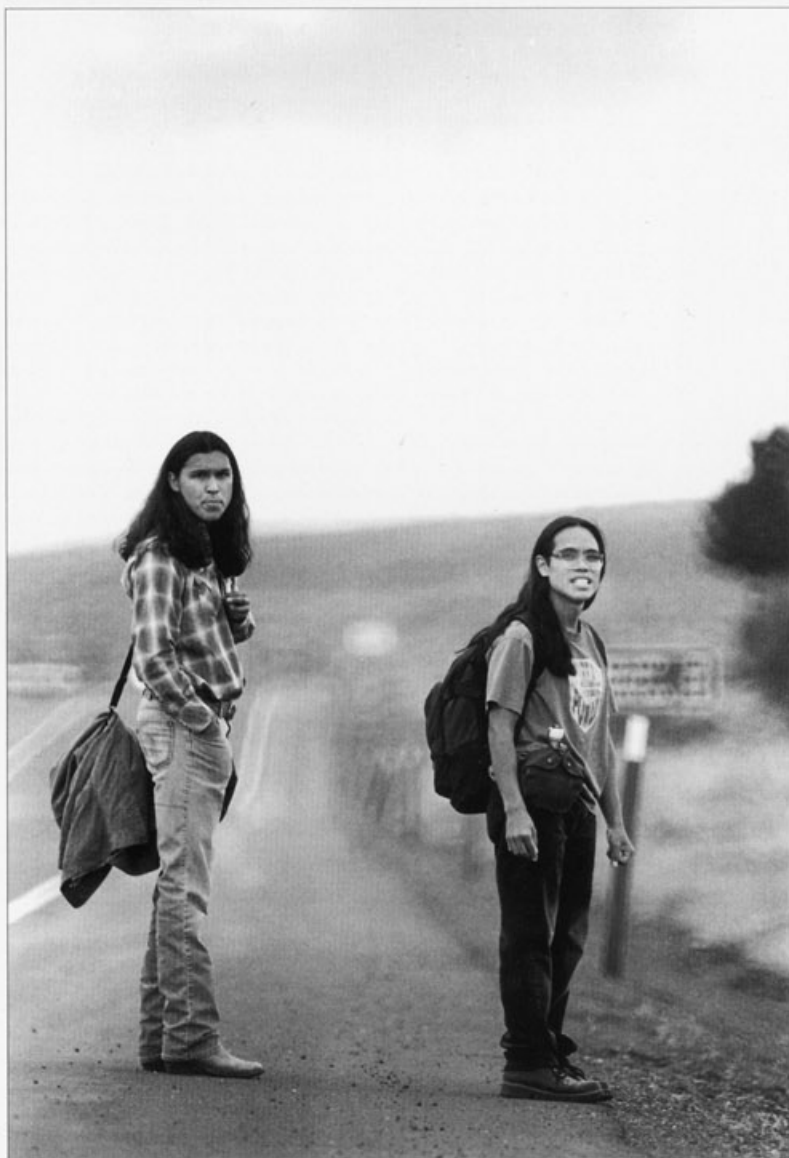
Native people have kept their stories, and the stories keep the People alive. For this reason, Thomas, role is crucial; he is the keeper of the stories, not only the funny stories but also the painful ones that Victor is loathe to hear. The journey to Arizona turns out to be more than just a responsibility 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'Alène 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 Fistfight 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 Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Sánchez is a board member of HCP and serves on the Multicultural Committee of the United Way.



Adam Beach and Evan Adams in scenes from *Smoke Signals*. Photos by Jill Sabella

The Diving Board

Robert Langham III

We were at 6,800 feet pushing through head-high oak tangles on the back shoulder of Half Dome when a pack-hung branch slapped me in the face and knocked a lens out of my glasses. It was twilight and a light rain was bringing the ceiling 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, waited for my mind to calm 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 1973 as students at the Ansel Adams Workshop. We returned as assistants 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 came 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 cornice 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 desk in Texas or on a topo map by fingertip, it seems a doable day 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 identifiable and celebrated peaks in the world. The Matterhorn, Trango Tower and Everest 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 hangs there, knife-edge clean, beckoning, 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 the immortal slanting pine to see what happens between the monolith and me. Maybe music, maybe poetry, maybe nothing. Maybe a photograph. Now Chris and I are stuck in the brush and failing 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 Eloquent Light*. It's a stazy overblown caricature of a book, one-half of a planned biography of Ansel who was portrayed in a heroic and Olympian manner. It is a period piece. The publishing date, 1963, before the assassination of Kennedy, before Vietnam, before our collective loss of innocence brings it into clarity. *Monolith* was plastered on the dust jacket.

At the opening cocktail party of the 1973 workshop behind Best's Studio in



Robert Langham III, *The Diving Board Area*, 1998

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 stoically. From the drift of what filtered through my high school français she didn't think much of workshops, me or the other students. I sat in the vapor of her breath, clutching my copy of *Eloquent*, not knowing a cocktail from a cockatiel and praying that somebody had covered all open flames. "Ills sont imbecils, sont provinciaux." She tapped the ash off her cigarette and it landed on the toe of my hiking boot, glowing. I chewed 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 Steiglitz and Steichen. She edited Weston's *Daybooks*. She had a private parking slot 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 appraiser 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 12-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 that you can step twice in the same river but you only get wetter. 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 shop: 40 pounds. I might stand in his tripod holes.

In his 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 got connected.

And connection, for lack of a better English word, is the whole fight. It's the "it" of getting it. When a photographer gets connected to his subject matter, the images pulse and crackle with energy. If he doesn't get connected, isn't simpatico, 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 one 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; if it is bad, it is disgusting. They pour into the most common of artistic traps and set up house-keeping. 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 is 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. *Ills sont imbecils*.

And now I have other fish to fry, like getting two tourists down to Lost Lake flat and on the main trail before the rain really socks in and every bit of light is gone. We have one healthy 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'm unable to perform the most basic human technological feat. I can't make a fire any sooner than I could gnaw a Bic pin out of a root. Nancy is right and I wish I had her lighter. All I have is lots of unshot filmholders, a credit card or two and a topo map. I think Chris has designer pemmican, vegan road-patch brownies and some sunflower seeds. Dinner will probably conjure up ursus, judging from the scat scattered all over the route. I'm thinking high 30s tonight. Every time the mist shifts I take a bearing on Mt. Broderick and set my headings. I may be able to navigate the dark by the thunder of Nevada Falls.

I coaxed Chris up the slabs 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 sketchy 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 Fear squarely in front of his Buddhist persona. I'm 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, up. After about his fifth slip, I observe that his death cry, kind of a gargling wheeze, was unsuitable for one of his age and character. "Try Allah Akbar," I suggested. "It's a crowd pleaser. Or maybe just Mu. Some folks say, 'Off rope!' or 'Hold my calls!'" 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 retreating from our high point yesterday I went to the Mountain Shop in Curry Village to pick up slings, rope, camalots and some Black Diamond carabiners. Inside the entrance in a welter of snapshots from various climbs was a copy of Ansel's *Monolith*, slanting tree and all, in color, through a 35mm 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, Cedric Wright and the others got up is beyond me. They were daredevils. Virginia carried a 16mm movie camera. The film, on video at the Adams 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 eye-popping, jaw-dropping scenery the Sierra is known for at about the time we should have been dumping our packs on the bunks at Camp Curry. I climbed Grizzly Peak with my camera and set up over the embarrassing view. Ansel's party climbed here, and he said in his autobiography that he regretted leaving his camera below. In Smith County, Texas, we have landscape. This seems like Photoshop tourist scenery with waterfalls pouring out of the clouds, vertically sculptured glacier granite, and trees from a century or two back. In a world of Kodak picture points it is hard to calm down enough to look around at what's there.

Yesterday our group rolled the rented van up to the tunnel overlook during the afternoon shower. I set up the 5 x 7 under a plastic bag in case the light broke. I was prepared to shoot the faint hint of Bridalveil 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 metered 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 spooked. "They don't know who we are," Chris commented. Twenty years ago we were wide-eyed assistants and students eager for answers. Time has poured so much of my own blood over my head that answers are 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 mean us.

And for the present moment I am just some tourist. Late on the mountain and in for a rough night. Nancy's imbecile. In a minute I'll break the problem at hand down into baby steps and start going through them. First I'll get the flashlight. Then I'll find the lens. Then I'll use a credit card corner on the screw, slip out of this thicket and lead us down to a flat place on the slope, hopefully with a thick layer of duff and a fir tree overhead. Then we'll eat, if we make it that far, and sleep on the topo map with my darkcloth for cover. In spite of our jam no one is injured and we have all our gear. I'll keep baby-stepping and pay attention. The Diving Board will be another day, perhaps.

On July 14, 1998 Chris Johnson and Robert Langham will shoulder their packs and walk out of Happy Isles for another attempt at the Diving Board. •

Robert Langham is a photographer from Tyler, Texas. He is the only person ever to turn down an offer to be Ansel Adams' personal assistant, but that's another story.

The (New) Picasso Women

Harlow Tighe

The (New) Picasso Women. I know what you are thinking, but I don't mean Olga, Dora, Françoise, Marie-Térèse or Jacqueline. I am referring to his current women. No, there have been no sightings; the King has definitely left the building. I'm talking about Anne, Helene, Jeanne, Dominique, Claire and countless others at the Musée Picasso and elsewhere. They are the New Picasso Women, the caretakers of the Picasso legacy who laughingly identify themselves as his harem and hint at the mysterious Picasso Malediction. Their dedication to the dead master is all-consuming, and their lives seem to become intricately entangled with his to the exclusion of all else. Have they somehow been hypnotized by that infamous magnetic gaze which, almost a century later, still haunts viewers from the gelatin silver depths of his self-portraits?

Anne Tucker, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Gus and Lyndall Wortham the curator of photography, propelled by her purposeful stride innocently walked into that timeless web of influence while in Paris in 1994. The Musée Picasso was exhibiting the first of three exhibitions dedicated to Picasso and photography. Even though that first installation received scant attention from the international art community, Anne Tucker immediately recognized the enormous appeal and import of the collection of photographs by and of Picasso from the first years of this century. A collaboration of the two institutions 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 Musée Picasso's three exhibits on the subject and featured approximately 300 photographs, paintings, drawings and prints by Picasso.

Of course, putting together any exhibition requires much thought, preparation and organization. However, when a show features the most well-known artist of the 20th century, budgets explode, insurance costs soar, bureaucrats tangle, egos swell and collapse and lenders often don't respond to the most desperate appeals by fax, phone and Federal Express. Most large exhibits are organized several years in advance, but this enormous undertaking was given less than a year to get off the ground. When Anne Tucker, who has a notoriously hectic work schedule of exhibitions, articles and lectures, informed me that I was to handle many of the administrative duties of this important project, including several trips to Paris ... well, lets, just say I did my best to conceal any inappropriate squeals of joy in the workplace. While I had never had but a passing 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 Malediction.

My first mission to Paris was of a reconnaissance nature; the main objective was to return with a concrete checklist

and firm insurance values in hand. I was to wrangle with these slippery concepts for months to come. Nevertheless, being entrusted to handle these responsibilities was nothing short of glorious for a young museum worker like myself. I headed off to the Musée Picasso, a magnificent villa in the heart of the Marais district which has been refurbished to house many fine examples of Picasso's art as well as his personal art collection and archive of photographs, letters and ephemera. Picasso was quite the packrat.

After bumbling my way past security to the curatorial offices, I tried to get a grip on my first-day-at-school nerves and take in the atmosphere. The staff was solemn but courteous, and the library/archives seemed to be the main hub of activity. As I watch the researchers, curators and other personnel quietly go about their business, it dawned on me that there were very few men around. The environment was predominantly female. At the time I interpreted this as a healthy sign of female excellence in the field. Foremost among this group were curators such as Anne Baldassari, the intellectual force behind our exhibition, Helene Seckel, chief curator of the museum, and the many members of the research staff who intimately know the recesses of the archives and are 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 innumerable details and 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 so-called Picasso Malediction fully explained to me. According to the insiders (and lifetime Picasso zombies), Picasso somehow manages from beyond the grave to attract a trusty female coterie who selflessly devote their energies to his life and works (much as this consorts 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 Malediction. Perhaps they were exhausted and emotionally depleted like Picasso's real wives and lovers, whose dramatic lives included tuberculosis, mental institutions and suicides?

I was caught, but it was too late to go back. And as Picasso's lifetime lovers surely found out, there are certain benefits to intimacy (intellectual or otherwise) with the great man. How often do you get to minutely examine unglazed, naked Picassos; watch as conservators remove masterpieces from their frames to reveal an unknown border or verso; assist curators in searches through vaults and find little-seen works along the way, visit private collections where magnificent Picassos hang over the couch? Did I mention that during one trip to Paris I rented an apartment in the Marais district that, as it



Pablo Picasso, *Autoportrait devant, "Homme accoude sur une table,"* 1915–16

turned out, had been decorated by Paloma Picasso, daughter of the artist and dear friend of the owner. The new had fully closed.

Pablo Picasso was undoubtedly a man of many surprises. Who knew that the painter, sculptor and printmaker also directed that gaze through the lens of a camera? Well, a few informed women knew, but the point is that some aspect of Picasso's genius lay in his ability to recognize something of value, to extricate the essential or file it away for future use. He was a collector of photographs, clippings, postcards and even people. The list of Picasso women who idled on the sidelines even after they had been replaced is a long one. He never quite let them out of his life. Whence comes the joke of the Picasso Malediction. It keeps people on standby, even now.

My brief but rewarding affair with Picasso is over, and I have since moved to Milan, far from the eye of the all-consuming storm. Or maybe I have just inched closer to the source. Will I escape unharmed from the long reach of those otherworldly tentacles? I guess only time will tell. •

Harlow Tighe, former curatorial assistant for works on paper at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston is currently living in Milan, Italy. While recovering from culture shock, she is working as a freelance editor and translator for various publishers and is pursuing independent projects on Italian photography and futurism.

In Memoriam



Valentin L. Gertsman, Robert Barrett, 1992

Robert Barrett

Robert Barrett was born in Rochester, New York, in June 1939. Both his parents were of European origin, his father having migrated from Russia during the Russian Revolution and his mother having migrated from France. Exposure to photography began in his very young years; his father spent his entire career at Kodak and many photographic products were constantly available to him. Probably because of his father's career, Robert chose not to involve himself in photography until he was older. After high school, Robert joined the Marines. Those four years were spent traveling to many parts of the world, including Panama, Cuba, the Middle East, Japan and Vietnam.

During those years he met his "mentor in seeing." While stationed in Japan, Robert was instructed in how to see all the different sides of an object. His later detailed examination of objects reflect this teaching well and stayed with him during his entire career.

After military service, Robert spent several years in the Washington, D.C. area where he worked in both film and still photography. His documentary films contrasted the divergent lives of high school students from both wealthy and poor backgrounds. His still photography was commercial work done throughout political Washington. He married while in Washington and became the father of two children. As his marriage dissolved, he left Washington and moved to Houston, Texas, to rebuild his life.

In Houston, Robert remarried and resumed his career in photography. His main commercial interest at this time was black and white laboratory work. Here in Houston his technical side flourished and he began to experiment with modifying existing photographic chemicals and making his own developers from scratch. This detailed and extensive darkroom work began to show up in his art prints that he also did. He produced the kind of prints that are attributed to the masters of photography as he combined his way of seeing with advanced darkroom techniques.

As he approached his late 40s and early 50s, Robert once again began creating visual images commercially. His work included a wide array of subjects, from Presidents of the United States to industrial machinery, to art portraits. He continued his art photography and worked with other groups and individuals who were interested in photography to push their talents forward.

Robert Nicholas Barrett died on April 8, 1998, at the age of 58. He leaves behind five children and numerous individuals to whom he gave the gift of making visual images. •

— Marjie McNamee

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 1950s 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.

Baldwin, Gordon. *Roger Fenton: Pasha and Bayadere* (Los Angeles: Getty Museum Studies on Art, 1998)

Biren, Joan. E. *Making A Way: Lesbians Out Front*. (Washington, DC: Glad Hag Books, 1987)

Brenner, Frederic. *Exile at Home*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996)

Burri, Rene. *Cuba y Cuba*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998)

Codrescu, Andrei. *Walker Evans: Signs*. (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998)

Coles, Robert. *Doing Documentary Work*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Fenton, Roger. *Aperture Masters of Photography*. (New York: Aperture, 1987)



Greenfield, Lois. *Airborne*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998)

Harris, Mark Edward. *Faces of the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988)

Hart, Steve. *A Bronx Family Album: The Impact of AIDS*. (Zurich: Scalo and SCT Communications, 1997)

Collectors' Print Program



Birney Imes, *Untitled, Winter, 1993*, Type C Print, 5 1/2 x 7



Jo Ann Callis, *Untitled, 1994*, Dye Coupler Print, 5 1/2 x 7



Bastienne Schmidt, *Angel, Havana, Cuba, 1994*, Gelatin Silver Print, 15 x 15



Heidi Sherman, *Valley House Pond, 1991*, Platinum/Palladium Print, 4 x 5



An-Mi Lê, *Hanol, 1994*, Gelatin Silver Print, 9 x 13



Keith Carter, *Charlie's Garden, 1996*, Gelatin Silver Print, 9 x 9

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Herring, Jerry. *Charles Schorre*. (Houston: Herring Press and Houston Artist Fund, 1997)

Honey, Nancy. *Women to Women*. (England: Hexagon Editions, 1990)

Honey, Nancy. *Entering the Masquerade: Girls from Eleven to Fourteen*. (National Museum Photography/Film/Television, 1992)

Kaufman, Daniel S. *To Be A Man*. (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994)

Koelbl, Herlinde. *Starke Frauen*. (Munich: Knesebeck Verlag, 1996)

Kopelow, Gerry. *How to Photograph Buildings and Interiors*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998)



Lemann, Nicholas. *Out of the Forties*. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998)

Levin, Robert M. *The Brazilian Photographs of Genevieve Naylor, 1940-1994*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996)

Lowry, Bates and Isabel Barrett Lowry. *The Silver Canvas: Daguerreotype Masterpieces from the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1998)

Michels, Carol. *How to Survive and Prosper As an Artist*. 4th edition. (New York: Owl Book; Henry Holt and Co, Inc., 1997)

Mohin, Andrea. *New York Dogs*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997)

Odermatt, Jean. *Skyscapes*. (New York: Scalo, 1997)

Olinsky, Frank. *Buddha Book*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997)

Phillips, Sandra S. and Mark. *Police Pictures: The Photograph as Evidence*. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1997)

Purcell, Rosamond. *Special Cases*. (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1997)

Shames, Stephen. *Outside the Dream: Child Poverty in America*. (New York: Aperture/Children's Defense Fund, 1991)



Schatz, Howard. *Passion & Line*. (New York: Graphis Inc., 1997)

Stoddart, Tom. *Sarajevo*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998)

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