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SEPT. 19-NOV. 3, 1998

Dick Doughty

British freelance photographer and sometime BBC radio reporter Melanie Friend has been visiting the Balkans since 1994. The region that gripped her at once, well before it began to make headlines, was Kosovo, whose autonomy was revoked by the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosovic that same year. Friend became familiar first-hand with the tactics of the Serbian police, who rapidly spread fear through the predominantly non-Serbian, Albanian Muslim population. As a result, her visits were generally brief and a bit clandestine, always subject to film confiscations and surveillance that put anyone who helped her potentially at risk (yet she won the confidence of many who went out of their way to help her).

She faced a dilemma that photography, dependent as it is on that which can be seen, is poorly suited to address: How do you photograph something that, within the bounds of reasonable safety, you cannot witness? Abductions took place quickly and at night over a geographically diffuse area, and there was no possibility of photographing in Serbian jail. Beatings and searches were random. Although certain areas would be closed off by the police — strong evidence that violence of some kind was being perpetrated — these events were carefully orchestrated to take place out of sight of anyone who might document it. Deprived at every turn of what journalists call "access," she was unable to extract the kind of familiar, shock-based images of conflict, which usually depend upon the juxtaposition of signs connoteing the conflicting parties, that are the daily grist of war photography. Nor was there much visual evidence that could give her material for post factos images of scars, burned homes, bodies and so on. She found a society characterised by fear, and the imminent threat that once the Serbian military forces were finished in Bosnia, they would turn to the expulsion of non-Serbs in Kosovo — a fear that was to prove justified. But for Friend, the question remained: How does one photograph such a state of affairs? And given the humanitarian urgency of the situation, how does one do so in a way that can interrupt the visual monologue of news images and generate some measure of outrage to stop an atrocity?

"...when I got in the house, everything was broken and my 67 year old father was beaten almost to death. He was hit on the head with a truncheon and in the back with guns. My father died less than a year after this. He was very disturbed after what happened and never recovered."

"Every day we hear of terrible new happenings...every minute we are afraid that they may come back, and every time the bell rings, the kids get frightened and ask me to open the door. Any time this happens they jump and say "Mum it's the police, come to take Daddy away."

"My husband was in Austria visiting our son, when the police came here. There were about seventy, kicking the doors, chasing around my mentally handicapped son. They asked "Where is your husband?" My husband has a permit gun; I brought the gun and one policeman hit me hard in the face. I fell to the ground and was unconscious for three hours. Later I was told that everyone was screaming, my two boys were beaten in the yards and were left with bleeding hands. When my family said they must send me to hospital, the police said "It's nothing if an Albanian dies." Now I have hypertension and high blood pressure and at night I have nightmares of my sons being beaten. The police thought they'd killed me so they didn't stay more than an hour."
...The police searched everywhere looking for my husband and then left. Immediately I made the beds thinking that they had really gone. I got my little two year old daughter and changed her diapers, when suddenly they came back and three of them came in. They started searching all over again and they were swearing and shouting at me..."

She was certainly not the first photographer to face this question, but her response to it was one of the most imaginative and thought-provoking I have seen.

"In the summer of 1993 I interviewed an elderly Albanian man in Kosovo who had been beaten up by Serbian police on the floor of his living room. A reproduction of Constable’s 'Haywain' hung on the wall, and sun streamed through the window onto sheeplike rugs. His son, a farmer, had also been beaten up. The police had pinned him against the wall of the house and threatened him with machine guns. As I left the house with its trimmed garden lawn and colorful flower beds, its deck chair on the verandah, I was reminded of English towns and English gardens. In the village I saw several houses which had been abandoned by their owners, who had fled abroad. Even as far back as 1993, the Albanians I spoke to called this "slow-motion ethnic cleansing" by their rulers, the Serbs. I never forget the sharp contrast between the beauty of that village and the terror of what I had heard. When I returned to the village in 1994, again for an all-too-brief visit (owing to the daily police patrols), the old man was dead. He had never recovered from the brutal blows he had received around the head, and in the back, with guns."

Friend built on that irony of the orderly domestic interior in which an obscene act had taken place, the rape of the family refuge, by photographing selectively the interiors of their homes and their immediate, private environs and juxtaposing them with transcribed testimony describing the abuses suffered under the Serbian police. She amplified the visual impression of serenity by photographing her scenes during full daylight, without artificial lights and in medium format, in which the square boundaries of the frame give the image the repose of symmetry. There are no people. To show a face, she says, would have unveiled her story to potential harm. Yet she turns this limitation to her advantage by choosing photos of homes in which the tracings of individuals are more visible in the resident’s absence, for in such images the viewer relies on the decor, the furnishings and the personal knickknacks that are as idiosyncratic as one’s own. Friend printed her images small (12” by 12”), and framed them in unfinished wood without mattes or other borders. There are six images in the show, and although they are arranged linearly they are not in any way sequential. They are in a sense cells of a larger visual body, which is a meta-image that is the whole of the show. Alongside, Homes and Gardens is about as low-key and understated as photography gets, yet alone war photography. It is an anathesis. Friend is pointedly respecting the overworked visual values of news photography and calling attention to her subject by the sheer distance she gives in that rejection.

What gives the show its subtle, ominous power is the viewer’s knowledge that these photographs are not at all what they seem: These are crime scenes. The absence of the literal representation of the violent act or anything — or anybody — relating to its immediate consequences, the depiction of which virtually defies war photography, throws all that violence back onto the viewer’s imagination. This is of course far more fertile ground, and it is cultivated by Friend’s several layers of verbal contexts: her diminutive, thoughtful catalog could be utilized to good effect in any course on photojournalism and, most centrally, her live tape of interviews with Albanian residents of Kosovo speaking about their troubles, sometimes in English, sometimes in Albanian, each identified on a gallery transcript only as "woman, age 35" or "student, age 18."
SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH: The Making of Robert Frank

It is difficult to sum up the work of Robert Frank in a few hundred words. In a career spanning six decades, the Swiss-born American photographer has made thousands upon thousands of photographs and over 20 films and videos. More than a dozen books have been privately and commercially made about his work. This article, therefore, considers the period leading up to and discusses his seminal works, The Americans, Pull My Daisy and Me and My Brother.

Robert Frank served his first apprenticeship in 1940 with Hermann Seigeweg, a photographer who lived in the flat above his parents. It was with Seigeweg that Frank began to develop his technical prowess. His photographic style developed and technical skills refined further by serving two more apprenticeships with commercial photographers through 1944. During these years Frank also began his filmmaking experience by serving as a still photographer for the film Landau- man Staufenheimer and as assistant to Walter Weller, the still photographer on Steinbruch.

After the end of the war, Frank traveled to Italy and France. His first sojourns helped him begin to see the possibilities in the world at large. These opportunities, of course, were leading him, and many others, toward America. So, in 1947, reacting to what he considered the stifling, narrow mindset of his native country, Robert Frank went to the United States.

Along with letters of recommendation, Frank took along with him a copy of his first photo book, So Far, containing spiral bound photographs that would serve as a visual introduction to his exceptional technical skills and ability to create diverse imagery. Almost immediately he was hired by Alexey Brodovitch, art director for Harper's Bazaar and Junior Bazaar. Brodovitch was becoming well known for his cutting-edge layouts and for mounting young talent. At the age of 43, Frank was hired for $51 a photograph, Brodovitch also had Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus and Louis Faurer on staff.

In 1949, Frank was offered a position at Harper's, which he accepted, and soon began his revolutionary work to create a more experimental and conceptual work to give Harper's a more contemporary look.

Robert Frank's work is a testament to the power of observation and the importance of his early years. His photographs have captured the essence of American life and have provided a unique perspective on the experiences of the people he has encountered.

In conclusion, it is evident that Frank's work has had a significant impact on the history of photography and cinema. His work continues to inspire and influence artists today, and his legacy serves as a reminder of the power of visual storytelling.

Robert Frank's life and work are a true testament to the power of observation and the importance of capturing the essence of American life. His photographs have captured the experiences of the people he has encountered, and his work continues to inspire and influence artists today. His legacy serves as a reminder of the power of visual storytelling.

*Houston Center for Photography*
filmmaker Jonas Mekas describes Frank as an artist who "seeks the truth ... and one who reminds us not to forget the challenges of the world." Since 1968, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, has served as the archive and distributor of films and videos by Robert Frank. Currently 18 titles are available to universities, film festivals and cinemas across the United States and Canada. In the past, Frank's films have appeared as part of the cinema history curriculum at the Harvard Film Archive and Columbia University, honored at international film festivals and included in recent retrospectives in New York and Los Angeles. Frank’s newest works include The Present (1996), in which the artist contemplates his relationships, the anniversary of his daughter’s death, his son’s mental illness, and his work from his homes in New York and Nova Scotia. Flamingo (1997) is a seven-minute poetic diary recording the construction of a new foundation for Frank’s Nova Scotia home, and I Remember (1999), a remeantment of Frank’s visit to the home of photographer Alfred Steiglitz.

The American independent cinema was in its infancy when Robert Frank’s Pull My Daisy appeared in 1959. The film was quickly acknowledged as an important piece and is now credited, along with John Cassavetes’ Shadows, as the point of origin for American avant-garde cinema. In 1966, the film was named to the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry and released on video for the first time. Pull My Daisy is based on the third act of Jack Kerouac’s unproduced play, The Beat Generation. Unfortunately for the filmmaker, Kerouac’s involvement highlighted the true Beat Generation and, in 1999, released a 25-cent exploitation movie of the same name. A new title, however, came from an entirely different project written as part of a jazz-styled jam session by Kerouac, Neal Cassady and Allen Ginsberg, called Pull My Daisy. The title refers to the term for the removal of a stripper’s G-string. The room was rewritten and subsequently scored by the composer David Amram. The resultant piece became the theme song to the film, which was sung by Anita Ellis. Much to the chagrin of both Kerouac and Ginsberg, some words were changed for the recording.2 The film focuses on a visit from a bishop to the New York City loft of Mike (painter Larry Rivers) and his family. It is based on an actual incident that took place in Ginsberg’s apartment. Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky were visiting Neal Cassady in California. Pull My Daisy alternates between chaotic action and filmed monologues. Ginsberg states that the film is respectful of the actors as poets, and has the quality of “playing for eternity while at the same time being right there in time.”3

The film is shot silent; so Kerouac’s improvised narration becomes both a freewheeling commentary on the action and the voice of all the characters. The talks to the bishop (Richard Bellamy) about religion and the meaning of life while Milly’s wife (Delphine Seyrig from Last Year at Marienbad) attempts to restore order in the loft. As the evening progresses, discussion turns to nonsense and drunkenness. Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie edit Kerouac’s narration from different takes and add the original jazz soundtrack composed by David Amram.

Robert Frank looked away from the subjects of the film to the dissolved character of his debut film. With Pull My Daisy, he successfully conveyed the tension between the beat generation and the middle-class American values involving family, religion, and the work ethic. Filmmaker Emile de Antonio stated that the film contained “what everyone was hiding in the 1950s, homosexuality, a different view of the world. . . . That was Kerouac’s [Beat] total indifference to everything that would make the Westchester matron’s jaw drop.”4 Pull My Daisy is a revelation of what the world was about to be — all of the political, sexual, and general upheaval that was represented in the 1960s.

In 1969, Frank re-edited this film in 1973 as a tribute to his late friend, Allen Ginsberg. The new version of Me and My Brother premiered at the San Francisco Interna- tional Film Festival and was released on video the same year. Me and My Brother explores society’s reactions to mental illness by incorporating fictional devices and documentary cinematic devices to tell the story. The film also raises questions concerning voyeurism, exploitation, the struggle versus real behavior and the illusion of truth. After spending years in a New York State hospital, Julius Orlovsky is released into the care of his brother, who lives with fellow poet and lover, Allen Ginsberg. His condition is diagnosed by doctors, romanticized by poets and viewed as a symptom of mental illness by social and medical professionals. At one point, Peter Orlovsky forgets to administer Julius’ medication and his brother disappears during a California poetry tour. Julius’ deliberate state, detached behavior and silence makes filming a movie about him difficult to complete his disappearance complicates matters even more.

The problems Frank encounters while filming Me and My Brother over a three-year period become a metaphor for the struggle to bring truth to the screen. Julius’ lack of cooperation in the making of the film and his disappearance become a symbol of Frank’s struggle to control his subject matter. In Pull My Daisy, he uses improvisation, narration, and real people acting as themselves to challenge the limits of fiction. In Me and My Brother he expresses the difficulties onscreen, constructing films within a film to comment on the medium’s reliability. Frank decides to hire an actor to play Julius Joseph Chalkin mimics Julius’ gestures and behavior in front of a movie screen with images of Julius projected on it. Chalkin’s image eventually replaces Julius’ actual self and the actor becomes the “character” of Julius. Addressing issues of the real vs. the cinematic, this film questions the relationship between art and reality with the promotion of Frank’s application for a Guggenheim Foundation grant.

FILMOGRAPHY
Pull My Daisy, 1959, b/w, 25 min.
The Slab of Jesus, 1961, b/w, 40 min.
O. K. End Here, 1963, b/w, 30 min.
Me and My Brother, 1965-66 (remade 1973), b/w, 60 min.
Conversations in violet, 1969, b/w, 25 min.
Librettist, Earth, 1969, color, 57 min.
About Men (One Night), 1971, b/w, 35 min.
Sekka Karan, 1972, b/w, 40 min.
Keep Bigg, 1975, b/w, 36 min.
La Danseuse, 1978, color, 30 min.
Energy and How to Get it, 1981, b/w, 24 min.
Keep Bigg, 1975, b/w, 30 min.
This Song for Jack, 1983, b/w, 30 min.
The Private World, 1986, b/w, 20 min.
Camp Mountain, 1987, color, 91 min.
Run, 1989, 5 min.
Hammered, 1989, color, 39 min.
C’est l’été (One Hour), 1990, color, 60 min.
Last Dancer, 1992, color, 52 min.
Moving Pictures, 1994, b/w and color, 16 min.
From the Ground Up, 1996, color, 13 min.
Summer Cannibals, 1996, 5 min.
Remember, 1996, color, 5 min.

FOOTNOTES
1. Both German language dramas were made in September, Longan directed Lonestar Landsmord (1941), Night Storm directed Storbrand (1942).
4. Ibid., p. 105.
5. The children’s presence would weigh heavily in Frank’s later projects found in Conversations in violet (1969), the video, Nissan Improvisations (1985-RUS); and several photographs. Andrea died tragically on an airplane crash, at the age of 10, in 1974 in Guatemala. Pablo, who had long been treated for mental illness, committed suicide in 1994.

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. The National Film Registry annually adds films of historic and aesthetic importance to celebrate the film’s unique contributions to American culture.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.


13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
CONTACTING THE SPIRIT WORLD

BILL MCDOWELL
BANNER OF LIGHT
THE LILY DALE PHOTOGRAPHS
HOUSTON CENTER
FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
MAY 7-JUNE 10, 1999

Michael Odorn

The source and setting for this intelligently interconnected series of photographs is a small town in upstate New York, Lily Dale, that was founded in the 19th century by practitioners of Spiritualism, a loosely religious movement devoted to contact between the living and the spirits of the dead. For more than a century, Lily Dale-sanctioned mediums have offered believers guidance, advice, and especially the reassurance that those who have died are not truly dead but have only passed on to another plane of being. Scances are regularly held as are private consultations and workshops on various aspects of spiritualist belief. In short, Lily Dale is a place where one can seek proof of continued well-being beyond the grave and attend classes with titles like "Ascension 101."

William James (to whom McDowell sometimes refers when discussing these images) once observed that a person's predictions can affect religious experiences profoundly; Catholics are much more likely to see visions of the Virgin than are Muslims, for example. For a hard-headed skeptic like me, the residents of Lily Dale present simple targets of opportunity. A few of the Lily Dale photographs allow my skepticism to bloom evily, Kitty Osborne Mediuming (1993), the image of a middle-aged woman sitting with eyes closed in front of a house whose roof sports a huge satellite dish, suggests a coldly ironic disbelief about mediumistic practice — at least to me — as it nourishes my latent sarcasm. Meditation on the beyond? Yeah, right. Trinitarian transcendence is more like it. It's a fierce association of mutually exclusive modes of communicating with the Great Beyond; this apparent conflation of mysticism and electronic engineering.

But McDowell brings an understanding generosity and a notable patience to his task, a sympathy born of familiarity with his subject. Eight years elapsed between his first visit to the community and his first photograph there, and five more years passed before the project was done. The very deliberate pace offered ample time for the town's atmosphere of spiritual yearning to saturate the images and the picture maker alike and for the photographer to finely tune his understanding of the unfolding project.
Consequently, McDowell’s work is not as simple as it might first appear. He proceeds from a genuine affection for his subjects and a tolerance for their foibles born of his own sometimes positive experiences with Spiritualism. So in the context of the whole photo series, Osborne’s dish loses any meaning I might read into it at first.

And therein lies much of the power of these pictures. McDowell describes this work as turning on the “odd relationship between document and metaphor,” which is as concise a formulation of the problems of reading an image as one is likely to find. Complexities of modes of interpretation, the relationship of what we see to what we might see, pulse through the series as a whole.

The special aura of Lily Dale was the original context for these photographs. The light that exposed the film reflected off the skins of people and the surfaces of objects in a particular New York village at a particular time. The results are thus documents of a place and a time like no other in texture and detail. But McDowell has discarded the conventions of documentariness if he ever held to them. Having steeped himself in the village and its culture, he jettisoned signifiers of the place in these photos, relying on his sense of the subject instead. In a sense these images could have been made anywhere, even if it is quite doubtful that they would be made elsewhere as background elements or primary subjects in McDowell’s photographs. The paintings’ apparent lack of overt brushwork constitutes proof of their non-corporeal origins for believers. It is interesting to note both the congruence of this idea of brushwork with the common Modernist notion that expressive gestures are signs of the artist’s material “presence” in the painting and how nicely the lack of an artist’s mark fits as a description of photography, smooth and shiny, made as if by magic in a darkroom. Not coincidentally, McDowell resembles several Spiritualist photographers at Lily Dale, too. Three pictures from 1910 lovingly show an elderly man’s hands holding snapshots of UFOs, a baby leprechaun and unnamed spirits. The latter image is identified as fraudulent in the caption, suggesting the absence of fraud in the other two.

Regardless of the (to me, highly doubtful) facture of spirit paintings and photographs or their truth value, their inclusion in the Lily Dale pictures presents a particularly resonant observation about the act of reading images in general to the extent that one’s point of view profoundly informs their power to embody meanings. Like a Spiritualist looking behind the surfaces of ordinary states of affairs for evidence of an unseen world, I find myself looking at these photographs as carriers of poetic significance. I might call my system of analysis critical and semiotic and the Spiritualists’ superstitious or even gullible, but there remains between us a common urge to seek meanings somehow embedded in the mute images before us. We want a deeper truth than we trust the surface to offer.

Yet photography records surfaces; it produces precise documents of the skins of things without regard for the relative value of its subjects, attending equally to trash and treasure, much of the strength and the beauty of the Lily Dale photographs derives from McDowell’s ability to invest his images with a preternatural calm even if the overt subject is essentially unimportant. Over the course of his project, McDowell came to notice that unlikely observations and seemingly minute snippets of advice he got from the mediums (e.g., “Your fruit trees need pruning,” from someone who ought to have no knowledge of his home at all, much less his fruit trees) carried much more significance for him than purportedly weightier pronouncements. These little lessons formed what he calls a “white crow” experience, borrowing from William James’ characterization of an experience unexpected enough to alter one’s habits of thought. Once you see a white crow, your concept of crows in general is for ever changed. In such circumstances the commonplace can take on extraordinary meaning, as it does in McDowell’s photographs. Images of a light fixture, a bit of note paper on the ground, an empty chair take on poetic power as their concrete particularity is made to contain more general ideas within the context of the photographic series. Their surfaces reflect more than light.

Michael Odom is a painter and critic who lives in Commerce, Texas.
William Eggleston, photographer, is known for his color photographs of ordinary, everyday life. His work often features ordinary objects and scenes, captured in a way that invites the viewer to see them with fresh eyes. One critic described his photographs as "a kind of visual poetry," and his work has had a significant influence on the development of color photography.

Eggleston's photographs often explore themes of memory, place, and the passage of time. His use of color and composition reflects his interest in capturing the essence of a moment, rather than its surface details. This approach has made him one of the most influential photographers of the late 20th century.

Exhibitions of Eggleston's work have been held in museums and galleries around the world, and his photographs are held in many major collections. His photographs have been the subject of numerous books and exhibitions, and he continues to be a major influence on contemporary photography.
Eggleston successfully interweaves a sense of menacing oppression and wry humor, tapping into the fears and wit of his audience.

light Eggleston’s declaration that he is “at war with the obvious.” The Red Ceiling suggests some titillating narrative with its garish red walls, exposed light bulb and pornographic posters in the lower right corner. One feels that something tawdry is being exposed; yet it is absent. Eggleston states, “The Red Ceiling is so powerful that, in fact, I’ve never seen it reproduced on the page to my satisfaction. When you look at a dye-transfer print it’s like it’s red blood that is wet on the wall . . . The photograph is still powerful. It shocks you every time.”

Through highly effective placement, the photographs on either side of Red Ceiling take on similar narrative effects. The Blasted Tree suggests a spotlight night crime scene and the Old Man with Resolve appears rather ominous, if still somewhat humorous. Woman Sitting by Post with Chan suggests a dark theme of unshakenness and burden. Through manipulation of distance from his subjects, Eggleston conveys a sense of oppression or, alternatively, alienation. The girl in Little Girl and Playhouse is chased by her playhouse, our distance from her increasing a sense of loneliness and detachment. Again, however, the strength of narrative possibilities should not overshadow Eggleston’s exploration of formal elements. For example, the Menil installation exploits Eggleston’s interest in the play of line against dark backgrounds as seen in the electrical wiring in Red Ceiling, the old man’s watch chain and the ridges of The Blasted Tree against the night sky.

Dynamic surface patterns animate the final five photographs, an exhibition for the first time. Eggleston continues to play with the notion of the idol as subject, highlighting the irony of religious “kitsch” objects. Yet, this most recent work seems to be Eggleston’s most overt celebration of the dance of surface textures. The brilliant surfaces of Chroma Jesus and Barbie Angel beg the eye to explore the play of light and shadow. Church Gift Shop inundates the viewer with the interplay of text and shapes. Thus, in his most recent work, Eggleston continues to utilize the camera to explore the effects of pattern, line and texture, while celebrating the strange and the ordinary.

David Byrza’s initial struggle to engage with Eggleston’s photographs seems to be common. Weski argues that, “The ingenuity behind the pictorial language of his photographs, which are definitely not snapshots, is not immediately clear, and we must take a closer look before we finally grasp it.” Then and Now affords one the opportunity to look closely at Eggleston’s photographs. The new monograph allows extended contemplation and capitalizes on the photographer’s emphasis on the sequencing of his photographs in book format. The Menil exhibition and the Haskell catalogue are excellent ways to “penetrate the mystery” of Eggleston’s photographs.

Footnotes:
5. William Eggleston: Then and Now, Press Release, The Menil Collection, Houston, TX.
7. The Democratic Forest, p. 17.
8. Ancient and Modern, p. 28.
9. The Hasselblad Award, p. 10.
Human Existence and the Natural World

WORK BY DORNITH DOHERTY
THE LAST GALLERY
CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS
DENTON, TEXAS
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VOICES: RECENT WORK BY
DORNITH DOHERTY
UNIVERSITY GALLERY
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-COMMERCE
COMMERCe, TEXAS
MARCH 10–31, 1999

Sara-Jayne Parsons

Philosophical questions posed by inquiry into the complex relationship between human existence and the natural world proliferate concurrent exhibitions of work by photographer Dornith Doherty.1 Bringing to light an area of investigation that has occupied the photographer since the mid-1980s, the photographs exhibited in Commerce and Denton explore fantastic peculiarities that occur as a result of human presence in nature. This scrutiny of idiosyncrasies also highlights the roles that myth and science have played in humankind's attempts to understand and control nature.

With iconography encompassing portraiture, still-life and constructed landscapes, Doherty's combined works intriguingly weave together signifiers of surreal human narrative influenced by Latin American Magical Realism and also attempt to assess more empirically inclined investigations of the human species in the tradition of Charles Darwin. This enigmatic duality is grounded through Doherty's beguiling method of straight photography involving the layering of iconic objects such as live plant specimens and dead insects with manipulative projections. The result is a series of challenging visual metaphors that feature the delicious metamorphosis of mundane objects that enable the spiritual and the tangible to coalesce.

The foundation for Doherty's recent work dates back to 1994. Upon receiving a William J. Fulbright Lecture/Research Fellowship, Doherty was able to spend time teaching and photographing in Mexico for several months. With an academic background in Spanish and French literature coupled with time spent working and studying in Brazil, Guatemala, Peru and Spain, it seems natural that Doherty would expand her literary investigation of Magical Realism through photography. Indeed she became particularly interested in aspects of magical realism that she perceived in everyday Mexican life, most notably in the use of animal and insect masks in agricultural festivals.

Inspired by this notion of the transmogrification of human identity into totemic animal form, Doherty explores the allegorical power of masks in Ramphastidae (1994), which in simple terms is a syncretic portrait of man and a tocan. Through the combination of a frontal pose (man) and the profile (tocon), the two share identity through an eye that produces a deceptively sinister appearance that is unfamiliar and larger than life. This esotericism in juxtaposition, achieved through a projection of images, is also characteristic in the paradigm of Magical Realism where small facets of objects are converted into symbols that achieve mythic proportion. Indeed myth subverts pragmatism as a vehicle of communication. Consider the implied symbolism of the "eye" as a portal of knowledge with reference to the use of masks. The wearer of the mask can "see" but cannot be "seen." In Ramphastidae, the human form takes on a disconcerting ghost-like presence when infused with the identity of the toucan. Although essentially masked, the man ironically can still be seen in a new form. For the viewer, classification of the man-bird is not easily attained. The title, Ramphastidae, the Latin name of the toucan, is a puzzling dichotomy. It unravels only the material part of the mystery. The man-bird as signifier points to spiritual kinship between beings that can only be understood in the sphere of legends a realm where the real and the fantastic are united.2

In contrast to Ramphastidae, where man and toucan appear to physically merge and share vision, in the still life Roentgenogram (1995) Doherty assembles objects to compute decaying flower blossoms with an old X-ray of a hand. The metonymic power of this image revolves around the subtle use of backlighting to highlight the similarity of the hidden structure of flower petals and a human hand.3 This indelible illumination of patterns of order found in nature hints towards the value of scientific scrutiny. Doherty exposes an epiphany of investigation of the seen and unseen in the natural world, an area of exploration that unfolds in later works.

Roentgenogram also reinforces the tenet that human experience of consciousness is bathed in knowledge of the past and the present. The delicate transparency of the petals and the X-ray can therefore be understood as icons of transformation, metaphors of the transitory nature of organic forms. The color and appearance of the withering flower petals suggests wrinkled or mumified human skin. Small, dark, round blisters on areas of the hand on the X-ray indicate the alarming presence of buckshot and underline the historic role of scientific machinery in the effort to control human physical trauma and indeed sustain life.4 Indeed the overall tone of Roentgenogram is a refined combination of fragile self-realization and poetic sadness.

Doherty's continued inquiry into the relationship between humans, science and the natural world takes on new meaning in her most recent series of photographs. These constructed landscapes present fresh challenges in seeing due to their sheer size (4' x 5') a new venture for Doherty. Direct presentation of simple forms on a magnified scale invites viewers to consider unseen details. Again Doherty's carefully chosen fragments of plants, insects and other natural detritus point soberly toward knowledge of the spiraling process of evolution and the ephemeral nature of all life. This series of photographs indicates Doherty's move away from the iconographic influence of Magical Realism and reflects perhaps a less mythical inquiry of the natural world, a focus on the human desire to document and comprehend through scientific endeavor. This slight shift in Doherty's approach is perhaps best exemplified in two photographs she created in 1998: Forbidden Landscapes and Wipe Out.

Akin to the style of presentation found in herbariums or journals of a Victorian botanist, Forbidden Landscapes is a microscopic view of a collection of hens and colored lupines placed on a surreal, vibrant green plane of parent feathers. A taxonomist's dream, this photograph compliments the notion that botanical work requires observation and acute description.

The aesthetic appeal of the lupines masks their toxicity. Identification and classification of a species demands persistent vision and experimentation. But here the vision is sketched. The familiar is made unfamiliar again by Doherty through the scale of objects. Viewers must reconsider how humans envision harmony in the environment and recognize their place to classify and comprehend through scientific endeavor.
in the larger scheme of the natural world. The astute onlooker may also construe Forbidden Landscapes as somewhat of an homage to the history of photography in the employ of science. Certainly it is worth recalling that William Henry Fox Talbot’s photographic drawing experiments, in which he used simple plant forms like lupines, were probably as much about his consuming passion for botany as they were about his desire to develop paper photography.

In Wipe Out, scientific classification of a species appears in a literal sense as fragments of butterflies and other insects are superimposed on a grid. Beneath this layer there exists an image of a flat, Texas landscape, punctuated only by a pick-up truck and electricity poles. Like Doberty’s previous use of plant specimens, the butterflies point to the fragility of balance in nature. Here this equation is exaggerated all the more by the blurred shadows created by the insects surfing on a breeze, suggestive not only of the flux of metamorphosis but also of momentary existence. The very title of the photograph, Wipe Out, begs the question of whether a species can be recognized, categorized and an effort made to avert extinction at all. It is also no accident that Wipe Out playfully intimates the sport of surfing, as the art of wave riding is based on a surfer’s athleticism and sensitivity to the environment at a given moment. Human presence, or survival in nature, in this instance, is literally a relationship based on balance and synchronicity.

In a period when human comprehension and control of nature have led to the creation of a new species of tomato, animal cloning and experiments in cultivating human tissue, Dorrith Doberty’s photographs emerge as utopian visions — testaments to the belief that harmony and respect for the natural world is key to the survival of the fittest. Do not be fooled. These are not romantic visions. They are suggestions that scientific study can accommodate poetic thought. As metaphors of human presence in nature and the connection between myth and science, Doberty’s photographs serve as sober reminders of how the “seen” and “hidden” must engage in the investigation of the natural world. Science alone can not perhaps provide all the answers we seek.

1. Born in Houston, Texas, Dorrith Doberty is associate professor of photography at the University of North Texas. She received a BFA in Spanish and French language and literature from Rice University and her MFA from Yale University. She has had solo, two-person and group shows in the United States and in Mexico. Doberty’s photographs are included in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Her work is represented by James Gallery, Houston.

2. This series of photographs formed the basis for the exhibition, Recent Work by Dorrith Doberty, March 15–21, 1990, University Gallery, Texas A & M University — Commerce, Texas.

3. It is interesting to note that Doberty’s use of Latin simultaneously reveals and masks the content of the moment. The traditional, scholarly classification of the Toucan by way of an outdated or dead language, is not easily deciphered by the average viewer. Therefore, the image is named, but not necessarily understood.

4. This weakness or inability to decipher real and ethereal in human characters is emblematic of Mexican magical realism literature, for example in the fiction of Elena Garro and Juan Rulfo.

5. A challenging dialectic between a natural object and a man-made object with a scientific function is also established.

6. The Key itself is antique, dating from the late 19th century to early 20th century period.

7. This series of photographs formed the basis for the exhibition Work by Dorrith Doberty, February 20–March 20, 1999, The East Gallery, Center for the Visual Arts, Denton, Texas.


All original photographs are in color. All photographs courtesy of the artist and James Gallery, Houston.
The Art of Illusion

MARIO CRAVO NETO
SICARDI-SANDERS GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS
MAY 13–JUNE 27, 1999

Ilene Marcellesco

Born in 1947, Mario Cravo Neto is a native of Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. His training started early as his father instructed him in sculpture and later offered him the visual experience of Europe in the 1970s. The artist went on to study and for a year at the Art Students’ League. This was the glorious epoch of Abstract Expressionism in painting and minimalism in sculpture and the influence of Morris, Clara Oldenburg, and others was keenly felt.

New York City in 1976 to 1979 offered this artist a vitally formative experience not only because of the pressures — both cultural and social — of the city, the extraordinary density of artistic life but also because of the fundamental solitude of the man in the metropolis. Solitude did not induce an estranged turn in Cravo Neto to the contrary; it made him even more bent upon inner reflection.

It took physical strength to survive afterwards in Bahia. Cravo Neto developed an art that is attempting to halt the acceleration of chaos and entropy univer-
sally threatening us from all angles and sides — an art that is about relating the chaotic flow of time that will inevitably gobble us up.

Saturno (1992) is a Greco-Roman, staged image of a giant white Chroma (a self-portrait) devouing the insinuclse dark
circle of a young man: a symbol both of the cannibalistic acts by which a civilization historically feeds on another and of the ineradicable cruelty of Time. The classical myth of Icarus is carried by an impressive photograph of flying-falling. By his utter subjectivity, deviated from the simplicity and avoidance of all accidents to an essential approach to things and events, the artist as thinker seems to describe himself in a phenomenological type of experience and perception. Concerning Time, his concept is almost directly lifted from S.S. Eliot’s Quartet but strongly, if indirectly, resonates with the phenomenological-existential view of the plenitude of the now.

In fractions of seconds, Mario Cravo Neto avidly appropriates events which he freezes or half-freezes on film. The trans-

Mário Cravo Neto. Sacrifice #6, 1989

ations from objective to subjective and vice-versa are both fragile and compelling. It is a ver-sion of the sublimest kind, an art of illusion and infinitely reverberating auroral connotations which would give the lie to Benjamin’s famous aesthetic promissumante: in fact, in the era of mechanical reproduction, the aura of the work of art is enhanced rather than diminished.

Man with Two Fish (1992), possibly the most precise piece in the show, succeeds in provoking and shine many a famous painting with a similar subject including canvases by Matisse or Braque for both of whom ichthyology was tempting, the Cravo Neto’s photograph, the back of a man is present, as a curved surface stricted with blood; the fish look alive, scared and ready to bite. Light contrasts are so well managed that they burst your eyes open . . . It is hard not to be haunted by this image; it has a movement of its own, as if rapidly receding into the distance, and yet at the same time staying with you.

The two portraits, Tiririca (1990) and Head and Eyes (which should have been juxtaposed in the exhibition for the added strength of the "double"), draw attention to the shiny shaved skull in Eyes, there is an upturned look and a wrinkled forehead as a result. Head — just a skull collecting light with somewhat protruding ears — is as striking as a Brancusi’s Egg. Elsewhere Cravo Neto segregates backs, necks and collar bones overlapping by an upturned head with unambiguous smiles (Saturno).

The Vendo series achieves equally magic secrecy through a combination of statusque postures and white speckled transparent black veils. The symmetry of the nude in Vendo figure (1988) is disturbing. Vendo Child (1988) is a relatively small (48 x 18") piece, quite essen-
tially combining greys, blacks and whites in a musical-tactile whole. In other images of sacrifice, the immobile white of the bird is interwoven with the ebony of wiry hands and arms in a magical embrace. Sacrificer and sacrificed are one. The artist does not have to depict scenes of ritual sacrifice, but only point to them allusively in order to arouse a "sacred awe." Explicit is, as far as I am concerned, the attach-ment to an aesthetic of hieratic gesture, to vertical intimating threat and violence pointed towards the above and to the sacred acts of conjuring forces of war or death. But mostly, as any accomplished modernist, Cravo Neto would look at — and transmit to us — the plenary beauty of these sacrifices whose significance he doesn’t need to penetrate, leaving the explicative task to the ethnologists who might write scholarly tomes about them without ever reaching bottom. Sacrifice (1992) emphasizes the titanic effect of a sculptor trying to inscribe some message in the stone. Stone as a photographed medium is frequently present, in the strange cult objects (a polished fetish in a cucumber shape that serves as car stopper in Silice (1992) — a large very impressive rendition of this inner state) and appears in other magical connections as well as e.g. in the half-humoristic, half-pathetic literality of the rugged Heart of Stone (1991), gingerly carried by two hands that seem to make a religious offering of it.

Says the Brazilian critic Paco Bargaín in Nexus "... his images are very dual, given that they show a strong tension between the spiritual and the erotic." Cravo Neto agrees with the characteri-

zation. Nevertheless, he subordinates this tension to a preexisting, objective and permanent, vertiginous swirl. It is a verti-
go that may well be a cosmic apprehension rather than the theme assertion of a duality between spiritual sublimation and the corporeal-erotic pull. Yet both appear as a corollary of cosmic turbulence and chaos.

The artist refuses to practice any mimetic aspect of art, and this is everywhere evident in the work. I can’t think of Cravo Neto’s photographs as depicting anything, the way, more or less figuratively speaking, Ansel Adams’ depicts Mt. Whitney or an orchard in the Santa Clara Valley or even a Cézanne perspectively depicts the Mt. Ste. Victoire. Cravo Neto’s subjects are not famous and recognizable as Man Ray’s are; figures that patently existed in the mundane consciousness before his camera focused on them. Much like the Japanese artist-photographer Nakajii Yasui in the 1950s, the human dimensions (including ethnic characteristics) are powerfully expressed. This is due, however, to the strict purpose of form, the mastery of contrast, the stylized rhythms we face not subjects in themselves, waiting to be uncovered and rematerialized, but are dealt essentially the human drama, the live encounters, the felicitous occasions for the artist’s appropriation, the supports for his aesthet-
ic vision. In what the late Heidegger described as “the event of Appropriation,” Time and Being come together the artist’s sending (e.g., of the art work) in the des-
tiny of Being (viz: into the world at large) may be characterized as a giving in which the sending source keeps itself back and thus withdrawn from unconcealment (the openness of truth). In this appropriating space-time exposure, that is the work of art, Being gives itself without division or opposition.

A different kind of approach to criticism imposes itself therefore when photography is neither reporting on his-
torically recognizable events, nor doing portraiture, nor trying to fix on paper a landscape — urban, rural, microscopic or astronomical. Such criticism does not have to be necessarily formalistic. Even when our artist focused on the growth of plants in a terrarium, the aesthetic effect far overstepped the boundaries of the natural process. Hence “describing depiction” misses the point. There are certainly in Cravo Neto’s panoply some classically recognizable, even though unconventional, takes — for
instance, the portraits of Lucía, Mother of the Artist (1993), the portrait of Mario Cravo Neto, the Father (1995) and of Lukas the artist’s son; as recent as 1997! all prod-
iously imbued with parental and filial piety. But don’t they concentrate, rather than on a flatterly recorded similitude, on intentional objects — viz. on what he loves, on that which excites and inspires his aesthetic and ethical pellipite? It is only through this prism that the well-
known features will appear. Not mere Lukas’s scan neck in a favorite foreskinned position discloses a shade of expressionism. Elsewhere, too, the artist refines in capturing curves ideally graceful which elevate the tomes of his pictures almost to symbolic heights.

Neto’s art, at least in its black-and-
white variants, is predominately abstract, for he does not present or represent an optical retinal view of his subjects, does not imitate, emulate or simulate objects of our everyday visual universe, does not lay claim to anthropological, ethno-
graphic, psychanalytical, ideological or political truth. If truth there be, it is of another order.

The black-and-white set of Cravo Neto’s photographs shows a moving, if sad, parade of birds; snow white, or speckled, young and silky, straggled or on the verge of being killed, always poised in a movement, a sacrificial posture, hostages to man’s dark hands, never so far, never free.

His photographs are relatively large (34 x 56 for the largest; 18 x 28 for the middle ones; and 17 x 24 for the smaller ones). As is the case with any artist’s “perfection,” it is hard to substantially reduce their size without losing the originally intended effect. Rothko said once: “I paint large in order to be intimate.” It seems that by involving us in his big images, Cravo Neto achieves something similar; we are drawn close to the palpable textures of the objects which, in turn, envelop us in their subtle drama of sacrifices, magic rituals, alert us to the mysterious signification of sacred objects and people officiating with hieratic ges-
tures. This is one, if not the main, procedure conducive to the emotional impact of Cravo Neto’s art.

So far, we have seen in Houston only about one hundred of Cravo Neto’s scenes. The little that was made available, however, by the judicious choice of Mar-
altes Szarkowski, compensated in kind and quality our huge gap in information. There is this enormous body of work in color that includes definitively drier historical-anthropological perspectives.
work alone. According to LOC archivist Liz Murray, it will take two archivists another two years to catalogue the entire collection.

But it has already been three years, and two more was too long for LOC senior curator of photography and film, Roy Flukiger, to wait to unveil the historic and artistic contents of the treasure. Working together, Flukiger, Murray and Lisa Bayse, curator for the LBJ Library and Museum, pulled off the seemingly impossible. They began in September 1998, with only the agreement that they wanted to exhibit a comprehensively retrospective of Duncan’s work. Less than six months later, on March 6, 1999, the three co-curators cleared the way through the LBJ Library as a Marine color guard opened ceremonies and USMC Brigadier General William Whitley presented Duncan with the Distinguished Public Service Medal to open the exhibition, David Douglas Duncan: One Life, A Photographic Odyssey.

“The hardest part was figuring out what to eliminate,” said Flukiger. “Still, we ended up with more than 400 images and artifacts that cover 2,500 feet of wall space. It was the first time we had worked on a major project with the LBJ Library and things couldn’t have been smoother.” Flukiger continued. The exhibition is free and open to the public.

One of the most significant and insightful aspects of the exhibit is the integration of artifacts with the images. At first one wonders why an individual would save so many things. But as one takes in the work it becomes clear that the exhibit is about people and about relationships. It is not simply a disconnected observer’s pictures of something happening out there. The images reflect what was happening between the photographer, the subject and the world in which they were immersed together. Duncan did not go anywhere just to look. He went to live. In that regard, the artifacts — the notebooks, letters, cameras, medals, gifts, shoes, rings, suitcases, books mock-up notes — are as important as the images if we are to truly understand, as closely as possible, the real meaning of the work in its context. Duncan was not an observer. He was a participant who knew, loved and cared about and for the people he photographed.

That is why he saved all of these artifacts — because they are not artifacts to him. They are memories of life and people. In that regard, they tell the story behind the images in ways that nothing else could. Like his life, David Douglas Duncan’s retrospective is a fascinating odyssey. It is a journey from an immense marble hall into a constructed room — not a large room, but the first of a labyrinth within a labyrinth. Juxtaposed from right to left are an ornate Arabian bronze that was a gift from His Royal Highness Al Saud; several large images, including a color image of Picasso gesturing pourquoi to a column of weary soldiers in a freezing winter landscape, an enlarged Newseow cover from March 6, 1999, featuring Duncan’s famous portrait of a gaunt Marine and a mural-sized image of another forlorn, battle-worn Marine who stands, staring back at you with eyes nearly closed in fatigue. The mind struggles to find the continuity among these diverse images and artifacts. The viewer is drawn into the labyrinth beyond this introductory collage by curiosity and by familiarity, yet incongruous and mutant sounds bouncing off marble walls behind and above and below. Through a surreal blend of the sounds of exploding bombs, shells and machine gun fire, mingling with the deep, recorded voice of Duncan saying, “not so fast, slow down, slow down now,” and the slow, soft voice of Lyndon Johnson talking about his friends and his policies, the viewer moves on.

Images and personal effects from Duncan’s high school and college years include his Boy Scout sash and Eagle medal and a 39 cent camera, a gift from his sister. This camera sits beside an early photo of the young Duncan wistfully looking at John Dillinger outside of a burning hotel in 1934. Above this is the Neiman’s, the photo that won Duncan the amateur division of the Kodak National Snapshot Contest. This sits beside a letter to his parents that he sent after his graduation from the University of Miami in 1938 announcing, “That’s it ... except I intend to be a photographer.”

From this point in the exhibition, the images and artifacts weave like a trail through a jungle through the life and friends of Duncan. In World War II, one can imagine the young reporter encounters again the mural, the haunting image of the same standing, slender soldier, unshaven, hands black with days of dirt. In his right hand, the Marine holds a rifle loosely, as if it might drop from his fingers at any moment. In his left hand he claps a pack of cigarettes. Most distinct is the stare; eyes nearly closed in exhaustion, but still looking, wondering, waiting. Here, in this image, is the connection among all these images, artifacts and lives. This Marine is Second Lieutenant David Douglas Duncan. He has just returned from action with an elite group of Fijian guerrillas fighting behind Japanese lines on the island of Bougainville in 1944. The photo credit is “Richard M. Nixon.” On the next wall is the story about the Fijian warriors that ran in National Geographic in January 1945. From the U.S. Marine Corps and the South Pacific in World War II, Duncan made an abrupt move to Life Magazine. The day after Duncan was interviewed by Life’s legendary executive editor, Wilson Hicks, he was called into Hicks office and greeted with a
field, Duncan was a soldier among soldiers. In 1956, he accompanied troops on the 39-day trek out of the Chosin Reservoir, fighting all the way under freezing conditions. In a cable to editors about his work in Korea, Duncan eloquently and painfully stated his working ethic as a preamble to his groundbreaking book, This Is War.

In his usual grace and generosity, Duncan made every effort to respond to such passionate requests for information and photographs. He also donated all of the profits from This Is War to the Navy Relief Society.

In his war images Duncan wanted to touch the individual with "revelations about warfare that embraced the universal." He wanted to show what war did to a man. In order to do so, he had to know those men. So, when he went to war again in Vietnam, freelancing for Life and for ABC News, Lt. Colonel Duncan fought his battle of conscience alongside his comrades at Con Thien and Khe Sanh. It was this misguided war that became the subject of one of his most profound books, I Shoot People. This book chronicled the lives and deaths of his fellow warriors while challenging the reasons behind the war itself. It was after the publication of this book that Howard Chapnick, then president of Black Star, remarked about Duncan, "You get the feeling he's inside the war." Again, in the images and recording of this war, Duncan reveals that relationships and the revelation of relationships are the core of his quest to explore and reflect life. He states that two of his greatest treasures are a cartoon portrait on the back of a cotton box and a hand-made award from the 3rd Battalion, Amphibians declaring Duncan, "One of Us."

From Vietnam Duncan and the exhibition move to another form of war in the streets of Chicago. NBC network president Reuben Frank commissioned Duncan to provide still "photo essays of the air" for NBC News each night after the Democratic and Republican conventions. For the first time in his career, Duncan shot a professional assignment in his native America. Here again Duncan remained true to his creed. He moved in close, either physically or with a special Leitz 400mm lens, to capture the character and presence of the individuals.

Even though Duncan met Picasso in 1957, it seems appropriate that the Wehrmacht's odyssey wait until now, beyond the wars and the politics, to wind its way to its end in the final room where we can celebrate life with Pablo and Jacqueline. In this room and the one just before it, we see the light and the laughter that we knew was there all along. Here we see the Duncan who worked with Niloam to design a fanciful prismatic lens to photograph everything in multiple forms on the same negative. Upon seeing a distorted, multi-image portrait taken of himself with this lens, Picasso exclaimed "Duncan, finally you've learned to photograph." Here we find the Duncan who publishes books like Sunflowers for Van Gogh, Thor, A Secret Garden, Magic Worlds of Fantasy, the loving tribute to his friend, The Fragile Miracle of Maurice Grant, and seven books on Picasso.

We learn that Duncan met Picasso when Jacqueline led the photographer straight into the bathroom where the maestro was bathing. We also see the photograph of Picasso in his bath and learn that it was from there that he first told Duncan, "This is your house."

Here we see the fanciful crayon drawings and sketches that Picasso did for and in jest of Duncan, including the crayon drawing on the front and back of a $10,000 royalty check that Duncan sent the great painter. Here we see the core of the warrior transcend war and emerge from the pain to live and dance in friendship. It is the same Duncan; the same principles. But here the relationship endures in awe of creativity rather than destruction. And here Duncan ushers us to discern the difference for ourselves. The only way out is back through the labyrinth and the war, beyond the friendship of Picasso, beyond the rhetoric of political conventions and the Vietnam war, near the images of soldiers on the freezing retreat from Chosin Reservoir and the impassioned letters from grieving parents we remember Duncan's advice to war photographers: "Keep your head down. Get in close. Close, close and keep the image simple."

This retrospective is but a small portion of what David Douglas Duncan has given to humanity through his life and work. Though UT purchased Duncan's archive, the photographer gave the funds to the HBC to endow a program supporting photojournalism. The archive and its endowment will help fund exhibitions, provide inspiration and guidance to students of photojournalism and life and serve as a resource for scholarly research into photojournalism and humanity for posterity.

In his own words, Duncan's "battlefield is a world of final simplicity, you live or you die. But Duncan's life has hardly been simple. Though focused on war it has not been centered on death. Though far from romantic or sentimental, Duncan's images are powerful in their revelation that life is everywhere within relationships, even on the battlefield. Here too could we proclaim: "Some days a damned good business...and everyday a fabulous life!"

Nowhere is this more evident than in the exhibition's juxtaposition of his images of young Marines dug in at Con Thien and Khe Sanh with the sounds of war and his own soft, steady voice, recorded for ABC News. Amid the sounds of the explosion of shells and machine gun fire his voice soothes the nerves of young Marines:

Duncan: "Not so fast, slow down now, slow down. It's just silly running around out here in the dark. Don't you see..."

Marine: "You're the only Marine I've seen who has a guitar and sings. Why don't you sing a song now..."

Duncan: "Well, maybe it would help."

Marine: "Oh, just don't do it..."

Duncan: "You know, just a little..."

Marine: "Well, OK then. Maybe just a little. A spiritual might be good, yea, just a little spiritual."

Audio photographer Rick Williams is a visual communications theorist and educator.
Photographs of Isolation

AMY BLAKEMORE: TEN YEARS
DOMAN GALLERY HOUSTON, TEXAS
MAY 24-JUNE 26, 1999

Bill Davenport

Amy Blakemore's work is a photography of isolation. Searching for faith in Lourdes, searching for childhood in Oklahoma or searching for natural beauty in New Zealand, Blakemore's photographs show us over and over an approach to authentic experience denied at the last moment by self-consciousness. Blakemore chooses subjects that have strong, traditionally assigned meanings (children, pilgrims) and interrogates their traditional meanings, skeptically re-examining the proposition that picture-taking can reveal the sublime. Blakemore's photographs present objects and situations that we feel ought to mean something, but somehow their meaning stands always just out of reach. As if taunting us, the figure in Girl and Hedge gives us a teasing, catch-me-if-you-can grin as she ducks through the gap in the hedge we can never enter.

Blakemore's low-tech cameras produce a characteristic glaring and vignetting that she uses with a remarkable fluency to communicate a variety of emotional messages. The mieness of an ecstatic religious vision in Light, the hostility of a surveillance camera in Ladies Room and the telescopic vision of nostalgics in Yard are all created using the same palette of effects.

Blakemore's early photographs of children focus on the eerie ephemeral quality of childhood, using blurred action to create a sense of the fleeting moment passing and often hinting menacingly at a dark future.

In Boy and Men, a small (frightened) boy turns to look at the camera, excluded from the dark wall of suited men's backs behind him. In Girl and Gun, a kneeling girl throws a Whiffle ball into a set of shadowy gaping jaws, making a game of a threat with unconscious irony. In Well a child jumps up to get a glimpse over a rough stone wall at some dark trees. In many of the images featuring children, the narrow area of focus recalls both the凸sumed world of a child's perceptions in which adults appear as a forest of legs and the backyards as a whole world to explore and, at the same time, the selective focus of memory.

Blakemore's pilgrimage photographs examine the places and situations surrounding the mystery of religious faith, defining an unbridgeable gap between sublime, subjective experience and objective reporting. Blakemore's photographs could easily present a sentimental expression of personal faith, or a satirical lack thereof, but instead occupy an unsettling middle ground that positions the viewer as a sympathetic spectator of other people's religious faith, yet not a participant.

In Gates, Blakemore uses darkness as a symbol for the unknowable, as Rothko does in his paintings in the Rothko Chapel in Houston. A black opening is framed by four waiting figures, each holding a tiny lantern that casts just enough light to emphasize the surrounding darkness. The sense of mystery in the almost black photograpgh is that of a presence, or an image, about to appear. What will be revealed in that central black square? In both a literal and spiritual sense, the camera cannot say.

In Light, a trio of figures in the middle ground look up toward a fuzzy light that could be God, a street lamp or a UFO. Blakemore's photo asks the question: Is that a holy light? If so, how is one to tell? One gets the sense that Blakemore wants to see the light as holy but is separated from the believing figures in the photo by a conceptual distance succinctly rendered in the photograph as physical space. Their cropped figures turn their backs to the photographer, excluding them from their experience.

Many photographers make portraiture a social activity. Blakemore's portraits are anticlimax: the ultra close-up faces of Steps and Patrick years to be friendly but are trapped behind a blury screen. Some of Blakemore's strongest colors further depersonalize them into formal abstractions. Blakemore's style is directly opposite that of artists who use a pseudo-casual, snapshot style to create a sense of immediate personal involvement with the subjects. Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs of his hipster friends or Richard Billingham's photographs of his dysfunctional family have a sense of privileged insider-ness that couldn't be further from Blakemore's isolated detachment.

Two images of adult women emphasize a less personal loneliness. In Old Woman in Wales, a dour woman in a checked suit stares at us. Square and tough, she seems to have no illusions and no hope. The hazy focus enforces a sense of her isolation and introspection. Long-suffering, the woman is unaware that a small boy is leveling a bazooka-like telescope at her from behind. In a sense none of the photographer's intrusiveness. Woman on Street shows an anonymous woman from the back, looking down an empty street with a Cindy-Shermanish theatricality. Unlike Sherman's Palm Stilh, whose essential subject is glamour and role playing, here the character is less important than the implied event we are waiting for.

Some of Blakemore's first color images are almost monochrome squares of landscape texture. The green square of Apples or the blue square of Sky are both overlaid with a veiled angst that contrasts sharply with their pleasant pastoral subjects. The apples that dot the pleasant lawn are rotting, wasted. The cloudy square of blue sky is scratched by bare winter branches.

Blakemore's New Zealand landscapes are more ambiguous. A comparison of Sky (1993) and Sky (Nelson) from 1997 illustrates the difference: the earlier narritive melodrama of the scraggly branches against a winter sky has given way to a bland serenity. Seemingly dispassionate, almost disinterested, each of the New Zealand photographs sets a different emotional tone: a serene Sky, a darkly turbulent See; some object, fuzzy Pool and a furry Glowing Tree. Typically ambivalent about the possibility of genuine emotional content, their extreme, almost subjeudicial formalism invites the viewer to project an emotional flavor onto them while maintaining a pretense of random casualness.

Bill Davenport is a Houston artist whose quirky objects have appeared in many shows everywhere. His next show at Lerner Gallery includes terracotta-nosed wood, mystery novels and Pueblo pottery.

All photos by Amy Blakemore, courtesy the artist and Isern Gallery.

Top to bottom:

Child, 1990
Fell, 1992
Hill, 1992
Three Girls, 1989

* Houston Center for Photography *

18
Journeys and Voyages

VICKI RAGAN’S VISITOR’S CENTER
HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
HOUSTON, TEXAS
MARCH 28–MAY 2, 1999

Michael DeVoll

I'm laying down in the back seat with my head on the armrest, my brother's legs resting against my arm. I can hear the radio, which Dad has up only just loud enough for him to hear; there is a baseball game on, but the signal fades in and out as we drive. As I look out the window, I can see the streetlights pass by — the rhythmic punctuation of darkness and light. We're on the nine-hour trip home from Grandmother's house. It's another annual summer visit and school will be starting again soon. I can remember many similar car trips as I was growing up. Trips to see grandparents, family vacations, moving to a new town (again). Part of this was the nature of my dad's job as a preacher. Part of it was the geographic nature of living in small towns for most of my childhood. But I can always remember Dad taking out the maps and drawing a straight line from where we were to where we were going. Then he would plot a route that was the most direct. That was the purpose of the map to show us where we were, where we needed to go, and how to get there. These are all memories that were brought to mind from viewing the work of Vicki Ragan.

You Are Here

Ragan, a visual artist from Atlanta, Georgia, uses the map as the foundation for her work. Visitor's Center was an installation on view at HCP. This installation started as a dollhouse-sized diorama of a room covered entirely with maps. The wallpaper of the room is the Rocky Mountain National Park; a small framed picture shows a section of northern Colorado; the furniture is covered with states in the Mountain Time zone; the door is an aerial map of New Mexico. For the installation, Ragan photographed the back wall of the diorama and enlarged it into a single photographic print measuring 14' wide by 9' high. This image loosely hung on the wall with grommets and nails, serves as a backdrop for life-size reproductions of the furniture, which have been decoupaged with the specified maps. The table holds the original diorama and a lectern is covered with the original Rocky Mountain National Park map.

Legend

Text on the wall gives you the background from which Ragan works. My mother and I could never read [maps] without a struggle, and it drove my dad, a naval veteran, crazy. Mother would hold them upside down. I remember my parents driving along outside Wagon Mound, New Mexico, on vacation. They were lost; Dad was driving; and Mom couldn't read the map. He got so frustrated with her he just started screaming.

This informs you of the significance of the maps that have been used in the installation. The ashes of her parents' remains have been scattered in Rocky Mountain National Park; the park and her hometown of Greeley are both located on the map of northeastern Colorado; the other maps are from various family travels.

Scale in Miles

Ragan says maps have long been a source of "curiosity, aesthetic pleasure and emotional conflict." Part of her fascination comes from the paradox of the view they provide at the same time "as concrete and real yet so abstract." She sees in her work a tension between "the undeniable history, autobiography, commerce, facts, things and the mysterious or impossible myths, make-believe, intuition, dreams, poetry." In the installation, the colors of the maps have been made subtle through generations of reproductions. The words and other markings of the maps are texture until they are viewed on closer inspection. Then they take on the nature of lines on an aging person's face you know that there are stories of a life there; but it will take time, memory and reminiscences to learn those stories. You can see the abstract miles of the journey made, but you have only an indication of the actual journey made.

Points of Interest

If you look for the core of artistic expression, it might be boiled down to the artist's exploration of her or his place in the world. Ragan has skillfully taken this idea and represented it graphically with the map. As individuals, I believe that we each search for our place in the world. The map can be used on both ends of this "journey". Before the journey begins, a map can help us know where we want to go and show us the best path to get there. Remembering that the map is only an abstract representation, however, reminds us that our plans may not be borne out in reality. After the journey is complete (or at least the most recent leg in an ongoing voyage), the map can serve as a souvenir; a reminder of where we have come from and the lessons we have learned along the way. Ragan has shown us a glimpse of the souvenirs of her journey while providing us with an evocative catalog for our own memories of journeys past and expectations for voyages yet to come.

Michael G. DeVoll teaches video production and media literacy at a private high school in Houston. He recently began pursuing a M.F.A. in Creative Writing and should complete this fall of his journey in three years.

Top: Vicki Ragan, Visitor's Center, 1999
Installation photograph by Lenn Balbien
ON THE PLAINS
PETER BROWN
DOUBLETAKE BOOKS AND
W.W. NORTON, 1999

Gregory Spald

I want to approach Peter Brown's latest book, On the Plains, from the point of view of a photographer. In fact, I am a photographer who has also been inspired to pick up a pen in gratitude to the library, and who now feels a strong kinship with Peter Brown's project. I should acknowledge here, also, that Peter Brown is a friend of mine, which has made the book all the more compelling for me and more difficult, and is the reason why I will refer to him from now on as Peter.

The American Great Plains presents an extreme pictorial challenge to any photographer who wants to give the audience an accurate sense of this unique place. Put simply, how do you photograph a nearly vacant space and make it interesting for more than a few images? In its most severe form there is nothing but the rutted straight edge of the horizon, the sky above and the flat ground below. Above the horizon — if the photographer is lucky — may be a theatrical sky, a few curios clouds, perhaps, marching east in formation. Below the horizon there may be the geometric rows of wheat freshly planted or recently harvested. Peter gives us a dramatic version of this type of scene in Plowed field, west of Levelland, Texas (1992). What makes such a scene so compelling, though, to any traveler who stops the car and chooses to notice — as Peter has done often over many years — is more than the eye or the camera can see. A big part of it is the silence, which can be almost perfect and unbroken for impossibly long periods. There is the oceanic panorama that defines being framed by the camera. The rutted edge of the horizon doesn't simply divide the frame top to bottom, it also travels 360 degrees encircling you and defining the bottom edge of that infinite dome above that is the sky. Then there is — sometimes for me, at least — the discovery that I am utterly alone. Between me and the horizon, at every point of the compass, I share this awesome place with no one else. How do you photograph that?

In On the Plains Peter has chosen to take us into this awesome place as we enter it on a road trip by car, which, he tells us in the book's Aftersword, is the way he first experienced the Great Plains as a young boy traveling with his family from California to the family's summer home in Massachusetts. These were the days before air conditioning or a completed interstate highway system, when his family made the round trip across the country each summer. The experience of these trips was vivid for a boy of thirteen or so, and the memory strong enough to become the seed of imagination that is the foundation for this book.

Something similar happened to me. When I was five my family moved to McCook on the southwestern plains of Nebraska so that my father could take a job as editor of the town's daily news.

interval required for watering steam engines. They contribute to American along the condescending term, "jerk water town." A trip east or west across the Plains is a continual process of entering and leaving these small towns. Peter has chosen to use this experience for the structure of his book. First, we experience the open spaces of the land; then we enter a small town; then a somewhat larger town; and, finally, we go back out into the wide-open spaces again. This structure gives the book a beginning, middle and end, and the sense of a cycle that returns us to where we began — out on the plains.

The question of how to treat the people who live on the Plains was, I suspect, another major photographic and conceptual challenge of this work. Without showing people directly, the first two live. The Riverside Grange of Buffalo Gap sponsors this one as a public service. But the map is aging. The paint is fading and peeling. Some names are barely readable, others not at all. For each map the two images announce a theme; people are here on these plains, but they are hard to find, not often seen, and they are disappearing.

This is consistent with the demographics of the region. Larger and larger farms worked by fewer farmers and less opportunity for young people, among other factors, have caused the population of many parts of the Great Plains to drop dramatically, sometimes to levels below that of a graph clearly visible in Airplane photography people do not lead to a sense of intimacy with people, it does reinforce the sense that Peter's subject is the place itself, the Great Plains, and not individuals who live there. This approach may be the most honest one Peter could take. He is, after all, just traveling through, as he has been doing repeatedly since he was a boy. He is not from this place he photographs so affectionately, nor does he live there now. In this way Peter's perspective on his subject is quite different from that of Kathleen Norris who writes the introduction to On the Plains from an insider's point of view as a current resident of a small town in western South Dakota.

Although Peter has chosen to photograph very few people, the book is full of evidence of hard lives lived on the Plains. For example, in the last photo-
graph of the book, Prairie Grave, western Kansas (1992), the prairie vegetation that is reclaiming the land almost totally obscures the evidence of the grave. The prairie grasses have done to the grave what the weather has done to the community map at the beginning of the book, suggesting that human habitation on the Plains is temporary, at best always a struggle, and ultimately, perhaps, in vain. This is a theme well developed in literature by O. E. Budraag in his classic novel, City of Earth, and by Willa Cather in O Pioneers. The theme was revisited in actual events by the Farm Security Administration photographers during the Dust Bowl period of the 1930's, especially in the work of Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein.

While the photographs in this book may evoke some themes of Farm Security Administration photographs, they certainly would not be mistaken for them. This is work of a new and different order. One of the biggest differences is that these photographs are in color, and in a particular style of color that Peter has perfected over the years. It is subtle color that is almost pastel; so subtle, in some cases, it is almost not there at all. Some of my favorite photographs in the book fall into this category, like Road leaving town, Marchion, Texas, (1988) and Railroad sheds, Newcastle, Wyoming (1995). I find the color here to be exquisitely minimal, yet evoking a kind of longing and sense of decay, like the muted beauty of dried flowers that today remind us of a more vivid past. Elsewhere, Peter's colors are somewhat more pronounced, yet they never reach the dense saturation we might imagine, for instance, in a National Geographic article on the Great Plains. His is quieter colors, consistent with a place that gives itself up slowly to the eye. In her wonderful meditation about the Plains, Dakota, A Spiritual Geography, Kathleen Norris writes about the visual experience of the Plains in a chapter titled Seeing. She says, "Here the eye learns to appreciate slight variations, the possibilities inherent in emptiness." Peter has learned that lesson well. And later, she writes: 'A person is forced inward by the sparseness of what is outward and visible in this land and sky. The beauty of the Plains is like that of an icon; it does not give an inch to sentiment or romance.' Something about small towns on the Plains reminds me of the toy buildings that go with model trains. Signs on these buildings, especially the commercial ones, declare what they are boldly and generally. The bank is just the "Bank." The beauty salon is "Beauty Salon," the "Senior Citizens Center," the "City Hall," "Community Pool," and "Bakery." No need to say more on the fronts of these humble buildings, because there is only one bank or bakery in town. Peter has photographed several of these characteristic buildings and presented them frontally and symmetrically to emphasize their iconic nature. These are portraits, in a sense, of buildings, and they serve to express something of the life and culture of the Plains. On one spread in the book we see an architectural version of good way may seem curious, but on the Great Plains the vast space that often frames a building tends to concentrate and amplify the building's ability to be read as an icon. These buildings — usually inspired by European building styles, rather than native American — often create a strong vertical counterpoint to the pervasive horizontality of the land. For that reason they pop out of the landscape, expressing ideas of overcoming the forces of nature rather than molding to those forces. For me, at least, these buildings seem defiant.

One way to measure Peter's success in describing the Great Plains in this book is to ask what he may have left out that is important. I can think of only a few things worth mentioning. We don't encounter in this book the monster machines that now roam the Plains, the tractors and planters, sprayers and and evict a white gabled back of a humble church in Champion Corrals, Colorado, with its simple cross painted in red, is set against the image on the opposite page of the rusticated stone facade of a jail in Clairemont, Texas, with bars on the windows. The church is light and ethereal, while the jail is heavy and earthy. Yet both buildings express a kind of resolve, as though they have stood up to the ravages of weather and time on the Plains and declare their survival with some pride. Talking about buildings in this combines that make it possible for one person to farm thousands of acres of row crops. We see no pivot irrigation systems that bring wetland farming to arid zones and create the wondrous quilt of circles within squares we see when we fly over much of the central United States. (These irrigated circles are the subject of some of Emmet Gowin's recent work on the Plains, which he photographs from the air in black and white, evoking simultaneously their orderly abstract beauty and their potential for environmental destruction.

All this new, complex and expensive technology is changing both the physical appearance of the Plains and the culture, and many observers feel the change is not for the better.

I would also put in a word for the cafés, coffee shops and senior citizen centers that are a common feature of almost every Plains town. Usually these are the places where the action is, where people — mostly older people — gather daily to maintain what remains of community and traditional Plains culture.

But this book is not intended to be exhaustive. The Plains are too big a place to be covered comprehensively. This book is much more a personal interpretation of a place that stirs Peter's creative juices, a place that touches him deeply and motivates him to share his experiences with us in these photographs, and also, in his beautifully written Afterword.

The Great Plains is not a place for everyone. Some people even experience an intense visceral anxiety when faced with so much space filled with so little distraction. This book is like the Plains. It offers the reader repose, a sense of calm and quiet, an opportunity to pause and find meaning and beauty in the commonplace seen clearly. The experience is very much like an extended drive through western Kansas, perhaps, with an experienced and perceptive guide who knows exactly where to point.

Gregory Spald is a photographer working on a project on rural America, a writer and assistant present at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio. His work in various public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian Institution and the J. Paul Getty Museum.

All photos courtesy of Harris Gallery, Houston, from the book. On the cover, by Peter Brown. Originals in color.

Going Gentle Into That Good Night

HOSPICE: A PHOTOGRAPHIC INQUIRY
JIM GOLDBERG, NAM GOLDIN,
SALLY MANN, JACK RACCLIFFE
AND KATHY VARGAS
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, 1996

EXHIBITION AT BLAFFER GALLERY
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
OCTOBER 16—DECEMBER 19, 1999

Michael Lieberman

Some years ago Willie Sutton, the famous Boston bank robber, was asked why he robbed banks. His answer was simple, and direct, "That's where the money is." My suggestion in approaching this book of photo essays by Jim Goldberg, Nam Goldin, Sally Mann, Jack Radcliffe, and Kathy Vargas is to put aside the written preface, the introduction, and even Marilyn Webb's fine article, Death and Dying in America, and go directly to the photographs. Nam Goldin's photograph of Grace and Carl at Home, a plain picture of a middle-aged couple holding each other, and Kathy Vargas' hand-stained photo-collage entitled Dam and Bill, Dam in His Apartment, tell us what this book is about.

Hospice, A Photographic Inquiry is, at the same time profound and matter-of-fact. The book is filled with the central contradiction of dying — how incredibly frightening it can be and how joyful at the same time. It is a book about gains and losses, about pain — physical and emotional pain, and how that pain can be lessened — and about resolution. There will be few readers who will not be engaged and moved by this book with its jolting mixture of despair and tenderness. In Houston, we are fortunate to be able to see the original photographs from the exhibition that began at The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in March of 1996 and is currently at the Blaffer Gallery on the University of Houston campus. In fact, it will be the Blaffer's first show in its newly renovated gallery space.

The news media have depersonalized death and dying by bombarding us with images that are remote from us. Documentary photography, news reels, and television have depicted the Holocaust, Vietnam, massacres in Africa, rebel wars in Latin America, bombings, shootings, accidents, natural disasters and fires, as if death and dying were the outcome of atrocity or accident. Surely the intent is to make the distant suffering of others personal to us. However, we also need to know what it means to die an ordinary death in the presence of family and friends, what it means to die in context, in an American context, to die the way most of us will die. The five photo essays that are the substance of Hospice, A Photographic Inquiry force us to think about the inevitable — we and those we love are going to die. The hospice movement has provided the most extensive repository of vicarious experience available to us on the subject of dying.

The five photographers have approached the topic of hospice in radically different ways. Jim Goldberg's contribution is a photo memoir of his own father's death. Jack Radcliffe captures many different patients — especially their faces — while Sally Mann has chosen a more symbolic approach by depicting events and landscapes that are meaningful to hospice patients. Nam Goldin's work blends these two treatments, and Kathy Vargas has employed sweeping, collage summaries of how death touches relationships. Oddly, although this book is designed to highlight hospice care (and is co-sponsored by the National Hospice Foundation), for me this book is more about what it means to die in late 20th century America than the hospice movement or hospice care.

In a wonderful, inadvertent way the book has outgrown its boundaries — what must have started as an ingenious, well-defined project has become something much larger: a record of how we live at the end of life and a recipe book for those of us who have not faced these problems. Art is supposed to be mean, to spill out over prescribed limits, and in this respect the book is a stunning success.

Art is also supposed to help us understand living — and dying. One of the most famous comments on the role of
the visual arts was made by the poet W. H. Auden. His poem, Musée des Beaux Arts, begins, "About suffering they were never wrong/‘The Old Masters.’" This extraordinary poem by a cold-eyed realist instructs us that we must not ignore suffering, that all of us must bear witness and act to prevent it. Now, in this collection, Jack Radcliffe’s work captures Auden’s imperatives visually. The faces of men and women dying of AIDS and their partners, families and caregivers go beyond words. They remind us of the importance of our own humanity in the face of the suffering of others, and they speak to the courage of both the dying and the living.

His photographs demand our attention, even as we want to turn away, as it is easy to snap off the TV if death becomes too graphic; the impersonal nature of that medium allows crap “en” and “cally” off. With Radcliffe we are held. His people are bound to us with such intensity because we recognize the possibility of ourselves. We may turn away, but his work draws us back. We are compelled to look. Radcliffe’s photographs also remind us of why we need art in trying to make sense of our lives and our deaths.

Sally Mann’s approach is metaphorical, combining images—a dog sprawled on a lawn, a damaged footbridge over a creek—with evocative text and quotations to expand our understanding of how we leave this world and what we knowingly leave behind. Kathy Vargas evokes a similar sense with collages of photographs of people and meaningful objects from the lives of hospice patients, Jim Goldberg, whose photographs of the dying in the hospice movement, includes the original typescript of a letter from a dying father. These approaches help us to understand connectedness—how the dying are connected to this world and to us and how we are connected to them. They are also a documentation of health, the health of the visual arts in late 20th-century America. Each contribution is at once unique and imaginative, and all manage to avoid the clichés that are so common in treatments of death and dying.

Dylan Thomas instructed us: "Do not go gentle into that good night/Rage, rage against the dying of the light." That is not the message of this book or the hospice movement. Rather, in the presence of the love and care of family and friends, we can go gentle into that good night.

For those unfamiliar with their his-story, the Hutterites descended from a contingent in Zurich that was persecuted, beginning in the early 1500s, for their belief in adult, as opposed to child, baptism. Thousands died horrific deaths as martyrs for this cause, and, others in defense of their belief, migrated in search of freedom, mostly to Russia, Poland, Hungary and the Ukraine. In 1539, a charismatic and authoritarian hater, Jakob Hutter, organized what had become a dissent-ridden community of religious exiles in the Moravian town of Aumühle. Hutter instituted the Hutterite Brethren, or communal farm system, which remains in effect to this day. The entire Hutterite population (then around 1,200) crossed the Atlantic to come to the U.S. between 1834 and 1879. Testament to their successful, self-imposed segregation, the Hutterite lingua franca remains the Austrian dialect they brought with them.

Capp does more than simply document this group of people as they are living today. She masterfully employs texture, line, light, shadow and focus to create visually pleasing images. Her technical ability is accompanied by a knack for recognizing and capturing things and people symbolically evocative of tradition and community, as well as the smaller, sensual things that make the Hutterites’ way of life palpable. There is some resemblance between Capp’s work and, for instance, that done by Dorothy Lange for the Farm Security Administration documenting migrant farm workers during the mid-1930s. Although the viewer does not “know” the people and culture being looked at in any definitive sense, there are implied characters and narratives (usually pertaining to individual’s place in the family, i.e., beautiful mother, proud grandmother, aging spinster, plucky young son) that anyone might recognize.

Hutterite culture, being communal, also has large quantities of the same thing in one place—a quality that Capp astutely noticed could make for strong compositions. A pile of potatoes provides a punctuated background on which Hutterite women sit; the shiny stainless steel silver vats and counter tops of their communal kitchen function as gleaming geometric forms reflecting light for an image that functions abstractly as well as literally. Trucks in a line, a gaggle of ducks in profile, tresses of tilled earth, dead chickens in a large wagon and a load of ears of corn in a large vat are all subjects of separate compositions, each sensitively records the formal sense that is sometimes to be found amidst the chaos of the untranslated visual world.

Another genre of photography in Capp’s book is that of women working. As one can surmise from Capp’s photographs, there is an overarching similarity among the women: their face is observant, old-fashioned dress, generally involving an apron; and a severe, pulled-back hairstyle and complicated yet simple-looking heads and wrists. One such female is portrayed carrying two round cabbages, holding one in either hand as sunlight streams romantically behind her sifting through the chaff at a diagonal that provides balance against the horizontal horizon behind. A woman with a kerchief in her head and a plaid apron around her waist is pictured harvesting corn, the path between the rows of corn stalks forming a solid counterpoint to the billowing at a right angle from the upper right-hand corner of the square image. Similarly, elegantly recorded, we see a woman harvesting tomatoes, tomatoes, tomatoes. Another woman, surrounded by leaves of bread she has baked; another squattting amid flowers in her garden.

These images bring to mind the art historian Linda Nochlin’s observation that “…nowhere is the work of ideology more evident than when issues of class interlock with gender in the production of female imagery. In the case of the peasant woman, the association of the rural female with a tireless, nurturing, aesthetically distancing realm of nature serves to devalue her potential.” There is a persistent visual romantization of the Hutterites’ way of life that, indeed, comes through most clearly in Capp’s images of demure, hard-working, down-to-earth women. These photographs, like the rest of Capp’s body of work, embody nostalgia for a lifestyle unfettered by the emphasis on individuality and isolation from means of production that characterizes the predatory capitalist culture. More than a monumental document or necessary historical lessons on the Hutterites, the ethic point of the photography is to document and engendering for a tradition-filled “world of grace.” There is a strange disjunction between the photographs’ aura and the accompanying essays written by Stephanie Gsell and Rod Stearns, both of which focus on Hutterite history and how remarkable it is that Capp managed to gain access to their insular and never before documented world with her camera. Capp’s work, if neither educational nor pioneering, stands on its own, and it does not need the justification found in the essays. The book is most likely to be appreciated by those who instinctively relate to the visual harmony of an image, the power of heritage, or the simple beauty of a fresh-scrubbed face.

Sarah Valdez is a writer living in New York City.
Off the Map

CREATURES
HENRY HORENSTEIN
POND PRESS
1999

JOHN CLEARY GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS
JUNE 5-JULY 3, 1999

Jill Waterman

"In the days when superstition dominated reason and magical powers suppressed common sense, animal spirits infected the world of our ancestors. Endowed with supernatural qualities like our own, the animals we encountered filled us with awe."


Since the time of the cave paintings at Lascaux, animals have been invested with mythological significance. They exist in a world apart from our own, as evidenced by their distance from the controls of human language. Our relationship with animals has evolved through the centuries from fear and wonder to possession and scientific analysis. Details of behavior and physiology are now plotted to establish the importance of these primal beings to our civilized human world.

The capture of animals in photographs has been put to the test in recent years, due to a variety of conditions that manipulate reality and problematize truth. The decimation of natural habitats, the coupling of wildlife into socialized environments, an insatiable appetite for viewing animals as entertainment and an expanded arsenal of image-making tools are all factors that politicize the representation of animals in photographs. Yet, the degree to which animals influence the image-making process by interaction with humans (and with the camera) is rarely discussed. This issue is especially relevant to the socialized creatures who connect with our lives through a measure of captivity. One photographer likens the wildlife inhabiting game farms to animal soldiers:

"In a war you have people who die to save democracy. These animals, who are not suffering, are also playing a very important role. Without pretty pictures, would there be the same affection for them?"

Given the proper conditions, a socialized animal in a well-designed habitat is likely to respond to an attentive viewer with the grandeur of a performer on stage. Such interactions, however, are always conditional. As such they are subject to the personality and ritual habits of an animal as well as the duration and intent of a viewer's attention. The comfort level provided by an enclosure's design is another contributing factor. The relationship between animals and viewers at the Foam Zoo's new Congo exhibit was recently described in the piece by John Gwyne, Wildlife Conservation Society's Director of Design: "We expected the gorillas to be much more comfortable here, but we didn't expect them to be interacting as much as they are. People have asked if it's one-way glass — it's not. If it were, the gorillas wouldn't be so close. They're coming in to see us," as quoted in The New York Times.

A new book of photographs by Henry Horenstein explores this relationship in elegant, iconic animal portraits. Horenstein is perhaps best known to the world of photography as the author of a best-selling darkroom text. That he is also a photographer of creative vision is apparent from this book. This series of images, made during the past four to five years, is the continuation of a life-long interest in the animal world. Over the span of his career, Horenstein's work with animals has ranged from personal investigations to commercial assignments produced for zoos and aquaria.

This current selection is a thoughtful arrangement of creatures suspended, like artifacts in amber, by done-up detail and limited depth-of-field. The book opens on a reprint of a little eye pointing toward the turning page. The next image echoes the shape of this eye, yet belongs to the mouth of a marine creature whose face is obscured by distance. From this introductory section, one is immersed in an artfully choreographed progression where visual associations create meaning through decisive image pairings. Some examples include the following: the buoyant grace of a beluga whale is collapsed by the tightly clenched jaw of an alligator; the painted expression of an orangutan is augmented by the ponderous weight of an elephant's foot; the patting pattern of a flamingo's plumage echoes the cluster of a school of carp; the vampiric embrace of a flying fox is countered by a comic greeting from a cowtown roe.

One is informed of each animal's species and genus by captioned thumbnails in a four-page index at the back of the book. This section offers a glimpse at the mechanics of the editing process as a narrative sequence unfolds across each page. The story presented here is one of similarity in diversity. We are witness to odd strains of inheritance in an evolution back to myth.

Horenstein has had a multi-faceted career as an author, educator, commercial photographer, editor and book packager. He has gained an intimate knowledge of publishing through past books spanning the subjects of instructional texts, children's titles and documentary photo essays. This wealth of experience has led him to release Creatures, his first self-published project. Paul Langmuir, art director, and Thomas Gearty, editor, worked closely with Horenstein to design page layouts that achieve both formal beauty and conceptual punch. Decisions about picture sequence and image size are orchestrated with placement on backgrounds of black or white to direct the pace of the reader's progress. These choices work along with the subtleties of the photographs to convey a sense of each creature's unique traits.

All of the images from this project were shot on Agfa Scala black-and-white transparency film. Agfa materials were also employed in the publication of the book. The manufacturer became an integral part of this project, providing scaps and film separations for publication. The book was printed in Vermont by Strinehouse Press, using a tromin process to render subtle nuances of color and contrast. Exhibition prints are made with the Ilfordchrome (formerly Cibachrome) process to obtain rich black tones with a wealth of detail. Seven images from this series are also available as limited-edition platinum prints.

Henry Horenstein's book, Creatures, published by Pond Press, is available in most bookstores. An exhibition of images from this series was on view during May at the Robert Klein Gallery in Boston and in New York at Ligne Roset. During the month of June this work was exhibited at John Cleary Gallery in Houston, Texas. Horenstein's platinum imagery is available through The John Stevenson Gallery in New York. In autumn 1999, Harcourt Brace will release, A is for — A Photographic Alphabet, a children's book, of Horenstein's animal images. Further information about this work is available from the galleries mentioned above or through the following Web sites: www.pondpress.com or www.horenstein.com.

A fine art photographer living in New York City, Jill Waterman works as a photo editor for the stock photo agency, FPG International. She is also senior picture editor and contributing writer for PhotoPlus.


Photos, from top to bottom, starting upper right:
Henry Horenstein, Flying Fox, Photographic Review, 1988
Henry Horenstein, Chelonia, Azores, Portugal, 1995
Henry Horenstein, Cemence Carp, Cyprus, 1995

Houston Center for Photography
Lewis Carroll, Amateur

In addition, Lewis Carroll took up photography in 1856, and he continued to photograph for the next 35 years. He publicly exhibited his images only once, in 1858. As an amateur he felt little need for a wide audience, much less widespread acclaim. At the same time, he held very high technical standards, as reflected both in the brilliance of his prints, and the polite disdain he felt for Julia Margaret Cameron’s soft, unfocused pictures. Carroll was not into photography for money, glory or fame but rather for the love of working with the medium, and the simple pleasures he took in making pictures of family and friends.

Reflections in a Looking Glass is a handsome production. The rephotographs capture the subtle tonalities of the original prints, the hand-colored photographs and Carroll’s whimsical sketches. Beyond the lavish plates, the book is noteworthy for allowing Carroll to speak in his own voice. Two of his best-known writings on photography — Huamaths Photographical and A Photographer’s Day Out — are reprinted in their hilarious entirety. There are also well-chosen quotes from Carroll’s letters and other writings that suggest the range of Carroll’s inquisitive mind as well as the spirit of his times. Carroll’s images have been difficult to find for many years, so Reflections, with its gorgeous rephotographs, is most welcome.

If there is one disappointment in this book, it is Morton N. Cohen’s biographical sketch of Carroll. Cohen’s essay is well-written and informative on many aspects of Carroll’s life and diverse interests. Like many biographers, however, Cohen is in the thrall of his subject, and he comes across as a die-hard Carroll defender. This is especially evident when Cohen turns to the topic of Carroll’s photographs of and relationships with pre-pubescent girls and again when Cohen raises the issue of whether Carroll’s photographs would be of interest to us had they not been made by the author of the Alice books. In both cases Cohen’s arguments are abbreviated, glib and unpersuasive.

Despite their occasional stiffness, Carroll’s photographs are intimate images of subjects that were close at hand. In this respect Carroll resembles many 20th century snapshotters, for whom the subjects of the pictures — friends, family, acquaintances — also serve as the primary viewers of the finished work. The photographs, the subjects, and the audience are prey to the relationships and circumstances that lie behind the pictures. They know, in other words, the contexts — personal and photographic — out of which the pictures originated, and this knowledge allows these viewers to animate the images in unique ways.

It is for these reasons, in part, that many of Carroll’s photographs seem like inside jokes that only Carroll, those young girls, those heavily bearded gentlemen and those elaborately coiffed women might have fully comprehended. We, on the other hand, might appreciate the surfaces of the pictures but can only guess at what was really going on. Looking through Carroll’s photographs is not unlike coming across an old family album at a flea market. We look at pictures that were made by and for people who are irretrievably lost in the past. It is likely that no-one alive knows or cares who they were — otherwise, how could these once-treasured albums end up in a place like this, open to the scrutiny of strangers, with a price tag stuck on the inside cover? There is pathos in Carroll’s images and in many family albums as well: a pathos born of lost contexts, and of what they portend for us and those images we hold closest to the breast.

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

Morrie Camhi
1928—1999

Morrie Camhi, an internationally renowned photographer, died on September 1, 1999. He was 71. Camhi was well-known for his photographs that covered many subjects including prisoners, farmworkers and Greek Jews.

Camhi was born in New York City. While attending UCLA he earned his tuition by working as a commercial photography lab technician. After graduating with a degree in English literature, he worked as an advertising photographer.

Camhi left the advertising business in 1969 so he could pursue his personal interest in photography. He began to teach photography at San Francisco College in 1972; at the same time he began photographing the difficulties of farmworkers. In a lecture earlier this year, he referred to his mission as a photographer by stating, "If I feel a sense of hopelessness, why shouldn't I memorialize that in the photos? I'm trying to deal with veracity in my photos."

Camhi will be remembered not only as a great photographer but also as a devoted teacher.
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.


Cavagnou, Michael. Astrophotography for the Amateur, Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 335 pages. Covers various aspects of astrophotography, including stars, galaxies, the moon, the sun, comets, meteors and eclipses, through the use of materials and equipment that are readily available.


Elgoi de la Fasan. Mexico City: Ministerio de Educacion y Cultura, 1999. 78 pages. Presents the work of six photographers Michael Ackerman, Antonio d'Agata, Marcos Lopez, Eugenio Novelo, Marta Benitez and Daniel Venzonius exploring the limits of the individual, identity, iconography, the erotic and rear abury.


FOTOGRAFÍAS

1900–1943

H. G. OLDS

Mario Cravo Neto

Houston, TX


Giacomo, France, Clara Gutscher. The Convict Series, Masque de la Civilisation, Joliette, Quebec, 50 pages.

Giacomo, France, Clara Gutscher. The Convict Series, Masque de la Civilisation, Joliette, Quebec, 50 pages.
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