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SPRING 1999

VOLUME XVIII

NUMBER 1

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Wall Company

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SPOT is published twice a year by Houston Center for Photography; subscriptions are \$10 per year in the United States. SPOT is a journal of independent opinions published by HCP as one of its many services to the photographic community. The ideas expressed do not represent positions of HCP's administration or membership and are solely the opinions of the writers themselves.

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Houston Center for Photography deepens the appreciation and understanding of the photographic arts and supports emerging and mid-career artists and their audiences.

SPOT is sponsored in part by grants from National Endowment for the Arts, Texas Commission on the Arts, and The City of Houston and TCA through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County.

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Shelby Lee Adams, *The Newsome Children*, 1997

APPALACHIAN ◆◆LEGACY◆◆

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHELBY LEE ADAMS

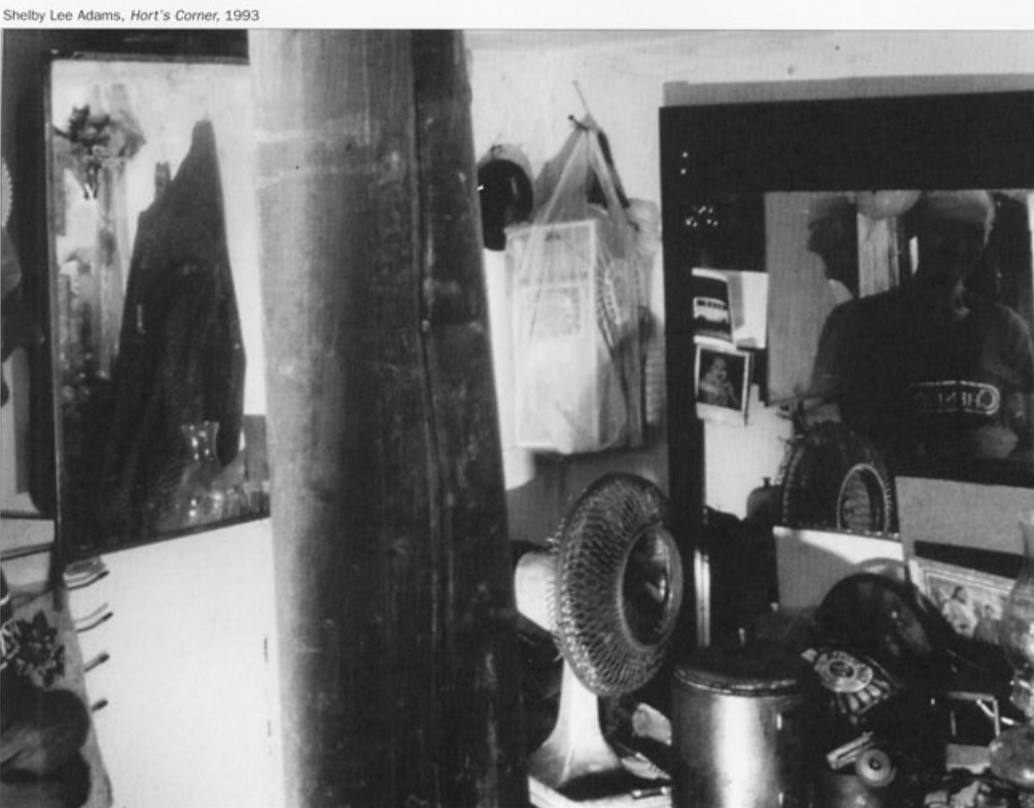
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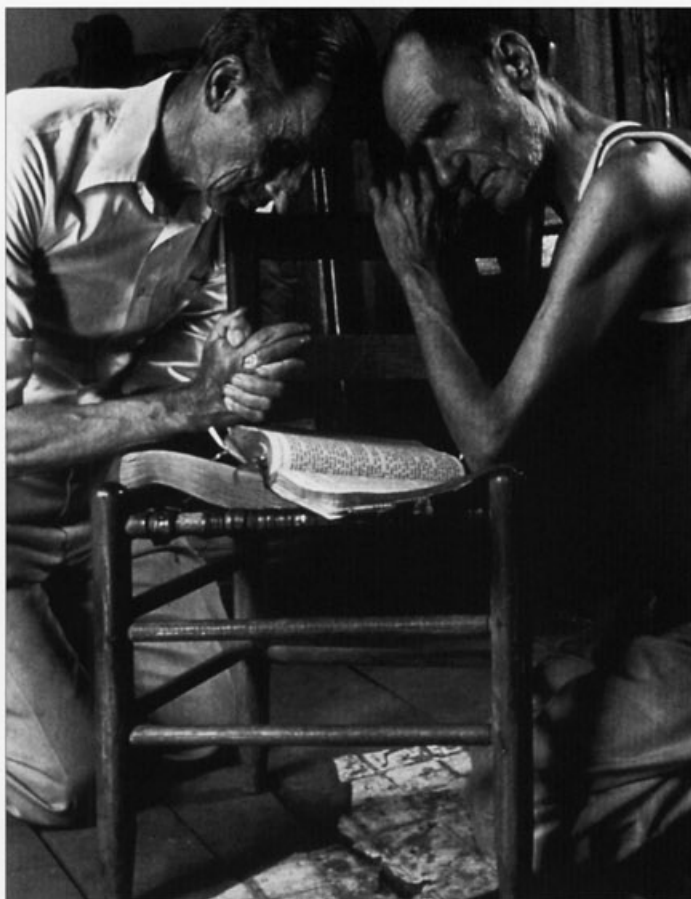
Gregory Spaid

Shelby Lee Adams makes hard photographs. Even his subjects occasionally tell him that: "You sure show it like it is; you show what it's like to be up against it."¹ These photographs are hard to look at and even harder to understand, because they are curiously deceptive images about much more than they seem to be.

For the past 25 years Adams has been returning each summer to a small, six-county pocket of Eastern Kentucky to photograph the people he calls "mountain people" or "country people." These are the inhabitants of those mountains who still reveal in their faces and in their lives aspects of the traditional mountain culture that is rapidly disappearing. One of Adams' goals is to preserve an understanding of that threatened culture, both in its harshness and its grace. He is especially well-positioned to do that, because he was born there, in Hazard, Kentucky, and grew up there, near Whitesburg on Johnson's Fork in the community of Hot-spot (now called Premium). "I know my world,"² he told me in a recent interview, referring to the Appalachian culture that produced him and that he has been photographing with such commitment and passion over so many years.

Yet it is the harshness that first we see in his work. Some of his critics (both in and out of Kentucky) have had problems getting beyond that. This has led them to charge that Adams is practicing a form of stereotyping that has become all too familiar in representations of Appalachian people. Those critics, it seems to me, are working with a misconception of what Adams is doing, perhaps because they are responding only to the undeniably power-

Shelby Lee Adams, *Hort's Corner*, 1993

Shelby Lee Adams, *Brothers Praying*, 1993

ful content of his photographs and overlooking his process in making them.

In Adams' current body of work from Appalachia — recently exhibited at the Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery in Dallas and published in his second book, *Appalachian Legacy*, by the University Press of Mississippi (1998) — the process by which he has made these photographs becomes more clear. This is so, in part, because of the excellent text he has written for the book that enlarges our understanding of the photographs with significant — and sometimes poignant —

details about his life, his subjects' lives, and the intertwining of all their lives.

The structure of the book is also helpful, especially the decision to divide the photographs into sections on one family or individual. Much of the power of the work comes from seeing Adams' engagement with a subject revealed in several photographs taken over many years. The section titled *Brice and Crow*, for instance, includes one portrait of Brice Caudill taken in 1974, one from 1982, and the most recent one from 1997. In the text that accompanies this section, Adams tells

of the curiosity he had about the Caudill family from the time he was a small boy watching them walk by his house (they had no car). "They chewed tobacco on one side of their jaws or the other," Adams writes, "and they would spit juice on the dirt road as they walked by. As a little boy, I would run out and stare at the tobacco juice in the dry dirt as it beaded up, popped, and disappeared into the earth; sometimes I would poke at it with a stick, wondering what the stuff was."³ It is revealing, I think, that Brice has a large wad of chewing tobacco puffing out his cheek in three of the portraits of him in the book. In another photograph *Brice with Prince Albert Cans*, 1982, he stands in front of a log wall covered with flattened tobacco tins. The significance here for me has to do with the role memory plays in this work — Adams' memory. Many of these photographs are a reenactment of images that have been in Adams' head since his youth. This is what I mean when I say these are deceptively complex images that reveal their meaning only slowly and only to those who can get beyond a conventional reaction to the power of their subject matter.

Before moving on from *Brice and Crow Caudill*, there is one more image in this section that I would like to discuss. It is the most recent photograph of them together titled, *Brice and Crow at Trailer*, 1997. In this image Brice leans against the corrugated metal wall of a double-wide trailer; again his jaw is stuffed with tobacco. Crow sits in a plastic lawn chair holding a plastic cup for collecting his tobacco juice. Both are dressed in what Adams calls their "Wal-Mart clothes;" no longer do they wear the overalls he associates with them from his youth. For Adams they now represent the new Appalachia, a place dotted with its share of discount department stores, fast food restaurants and the inadequate jobs associated with them. And there is another significant change that this photograph records. It was made on the farm where Adams grew up, on the site of the house the Caudills' used to walk by. That house burned to the

ground recently and was replaced with the double-wide trailer by Adams' father before he sold the farm and the trailer to Helen Caudill, the sister of Crow. Today, when Adams makes his annual portraits of the Caudills, he makes them on what remains of the place where he grew up and where his curiosity began to form about "mountain people" like the Caudills. This photograph, *Brice and Crow at Trailer*, 1997, is about more than it seems to be. It is not only the latest "chapter" in Adams' chronicle of the Caudill family, it is also, in some way, a personal record of his own evolving relationship to the place of his youth.

There is a photograph by Adams, *Hort's Corner*, 1993, that may help to illustrate further the complex dynamics at play in Adams' photography. This photograph also is a good one to support a major point I would like to make about Adams, which is that he is not a documentary photographer in any traditional sense of that term. It is true that he is often compared with famous documentary photographers such as Doris Ulmann, Diane Arbus, Mary Ellen Mark, and the Farm Security Administration photographers, especially Walker Evans, but his work is considerably more internal, more constructed, more cyclical and certainly more autobiographical, than theirs. His work shares as much with certain well-known "post-modern" fine art photographers, especially those that construct elaborate narrative tableaux, like Sandy Skogland, Ellen Cowin and Joel Peter Witkin, than it does with exemplars of "straight" documentary photography like Evans and Dorothea Lange.

In *Hort's Corner*, 1993, the subject, Hort Collins, appears three times: twice reflected in mirrors to the right of the photograph and once barely seen at the extreme left. His face and body language seem to suggest he is having a good time being photographed. Around and between these three views of Mr. Collins are some of the objects of necessity and habit that have been collected over the years in the bedroom of his house in Hooterville, Kentucky. There is an old coffee pot, a fancy glass oil lamp, a fairly new electric fan and packages of Beech Nut chewing tobacco. In the lower right is a picture of Jesus dressed in a white robe that is set in opposition to a murky reflection in the upper left of a toy flying bat. Mr. Collins referred to this bat as a representation of the devil, according to Adams. And, pinned up to one mirror, are two small photographs. One is of an infant with a broad smile; the other is of a light colored van up on blocks and without wheels. This second photograph is one made by Adams on a previous visit with Mr. Collins, *The Holy Van*, 1993. It appears in *Appalachian Legacy* immediately following *Hort's Corner*, 1993, the photograph I've just described.

I have described this photograph in some detail because the details matter in Adams' work. They are not random or casual, and they can be clues to meaning. Take, for instance, the old coffee pot. It was placed in the scene by Mr. Collins because he wanted it in the photograph for his own personal reasons. He had looked at some of the earlier Polaroids of the scene that Adams routinely makes and decided to add it. This is typical of the type of collaboration that goes on between Adams and his subjects. Together, for periods as long as several hours, they carefully construct and revise an image, taking Polaroids as they go. Adams uses

Shelby Lee Adams, *The Home Funeral*, 1990

EXHIBITIONS

these Polaroids both to preview his work and to give away to his subjects. Later, usually when he returns the following summer, he brings boxes of 8" x 10" enlargements to give away as well.

Look closely at Adams' photographs and you will occasionally find other photographs that he has given his subjects on previous visits, sometimes framed and hung with pride, or stuck to a mirror, like the Polaroid of the van in *Hort's Corner*, 1993. These "re-photographed" images play a curious role in the body of Adams' work. Not only do they declare the pride and pleasure his subjects take in being part of his project, they also make tangible the cyclical nature of his photography. Like the seasons, Adams has been returning to the mountains of Eastern Kentucky each summer since 1974 to make photographs. He rents a small house in the mountains where he stays for two months before returning to his permanent home in western Massachusetts. Year after year he has photographed the same people, growing up and growing older. For many of them he has been their family photographer. In return they have welcomed him, cooked meals for him, celebrated his birthdays and book releases, and they have invited him to enter some of the most difficult and intimate moments of their lives — as a friend. When one of Adams' earlier photographs appears in a later photograph — as in *Tilda*, 1995, — it is a strong reminder that Adams is a part of the lives he is photographing. It is only a bit of a stretch to say that he is both behind the camera and in front of it.

Adams' photograph, *Brothers Praying*, 1993, is another example of the autobiographical nature of his work. The powerful intimacy in this images comes not so much from the photographer being at the right place at the right time as it does from the photographer creating the circumstances before the camera, much like a movie director trying to realize an image in his head. In Adams' case, this is another image he has carried around in his memory since his youth, like the Caudills walking by his home. Here is what he writes about creating *Brothers Praying*, 1993:

"Before making the photograph *Brothers Praying*, I talked with Hort and his brother Henry for some time. I explained to them that as a child I used to go with my grandparents to visit the sick. I had seen Hort and Henry kneel and read from the Bible and pray for their ill mother many times. I asked them if we could set up a picture that would show this ritual carried out by mountain people for their loved ones who are sick and dying. Hort told Minnie (their mother, who appears dimly in the upper left of the photograph) what I wanted to do, and she liked the idea. This praying, reading, and singing to comfort the sick is a disappearing custom. For the Collins family, the photograph is a personal testament of love for their mother, and all of the sons have it displayed in their homes."⁴ Again, Adams' memory of a childhood event is the genesis of the photograph. "If I hadn't had a lot of these childhood experiences, these pictures wouldn't exist," he said.

Lighting is a hallmark of Adams' photographs. It is almost always a mix of natural ambient light with electronic flash generated by several flash units that he carefully arranges. This artificial light often comes from unexpected angles and serves to emphasize certain parts of the scene. Adams' lighting style developed out



Shelby Lee Adams, Brice and Crow at Trailer, 1997

of necessity. He often found himself, after a long afternoon of visiting with his subjects, trying to make a photograph in the waning light of evening. At those evening hours in the mountains it became impossible for him to make the photographs he wanted with his 4" x 5" view camera without bringing along the light he needed. Over many years his lighting arrangements have evolved from pure necessity to a unique element of his style. This is not the type of lighting we generally

Adams most famous photographs, *The Home Funeral*, *Leatherwood, Kentucky*, 1990 (from his first book, *Appalachia Portrait*) and *Brothers Praying*, 1993, that I discussed earlier. In these images Adams is able to exercise fully his talent for engaging his subjects and winning their cooperation in the collaborative process of constructing the photograph. Together they view the Polaroids and refine the arrangement before the camera. In these group portraits he is able also to exploit



Andy Hyslop, 47th Birthday Dinner with Josephs, 1997. Shelby Lee Adams (right) with the Josephs

associate with traditional documentary photography, but, rather, it is more theatrical. This "unnatural" lighting now serves as a clue to tell us that we are seeing art that consciously reveals its own artifice.

Adams is at his best, I think, when making a group portrait of three or more persons — undoubtedly, a challenging photographic form. Too often the subjects in a group portrait look wooden and the image seems to be about nothing more than the self-conscious process of making a photograph. This is not true of most of Adams' group portraits, such as, *The Newsome Children*, 1997, and *Burchal and Family*, 1994, or, for that matter, two of

his unique lighting style to emphasize and de-emphasize aspects of the story he is trying to tell in the photograph. For instance, in *Burchal and Family*, 1994, the boy on the bike, B.J., is lighted most strongly because the photograph is intended to be about his life. B.J. is pictured between his father, Burchal, in the foreground, and his mother, Esther, in the background. They are divorced, yet they continue to live side by side in separate homes. "I'm trying to tell a story without writing a story," Adams told me. "I'm trying to show this boy's life of going back and forth between his mother's home and his father's home." The welcome mat that hangs from the line in front of Esther in

this photograph is, as Adams points out, a particularly meaningful and fortuitous detail. There is often much more going on in the arrangement of Adams' group portraits than merely a successful formal composition.

Adams' photographs are often the result of a rich and curious mix of nostalgic memory, stage-managed story-telling, direct observation of a sometimes-harsh reality, and skillful photographic technique. Part of the strength of Adams' work rests on the fact that his mix of these elements is as fresh and compelling as it is disconcerting. I know of no other photographer who does it in quite the same way. This is a hybrid form of photographic practice that departs sharply from notions of documentary photography as an objective witness to events. Adams has no illusions about making a true or objective record, nor a definitive survey of Appalachian culture. He does, however, say that he wants his work to be "authentic" to the culture, which is part of the reason he does not shy away from the darker realities of his subjects' lives. His goal is neither to romanticize their lives nor to exaggerate the harshness of life that he sees.

As a photographer myself, I am extremely impressed by the depth of Adams' commitment to his subject. Twenty-five years of work on one theme. Twenty-five years of returning each summer to the same people in the same place is an astounding record of dedication for a contemporary photographer. Perhaps, his dedication (and his work) can be more easily understood if we see it, not just as the desire to make a photographic record of a particular time and place, but as a powerful urge to make sense of his own life through his art.

My interview with Adams ended with a quote he wanted to read to me written by the Eastern Kentucky writer, Chris Offutt, whose latest novel is *The Good Brother*. It is a quote Adams says he certainly identifies with as a photographer and artist:

"I think it's a mistake to make me or any writer a representative of a culture. Ralph Ellison did not speak for all black people. Louise Erdrich doesn't speak for all Indians. I don't speak for all Eastern Kentuckians. I speak for me. My writing is more about me and my problems than it is about Appalachia. I'm not a sociologist, ethnographer or historian. I just use the hill country as a canvas to paint my difficulties on. I'm trying to make art."

Despite the powerful subject matter of these photographs, we have to remember that Adams' work is as much about his life, his memory, even his love of his subjects, as it is about the lives "mountain people" who come before his lens. Whose legacy is it that Adams is photographing in *Appalachian Legacy*? The answer is, at least in part, his own.

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

FOOTNOTES

1. Shelby Lee Adams, Introduction, *Appalachian Legacy* (Jackson Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), p. 18.
2. Much of the background material for this article comes from a two and a half hour, tape-recorded telephone interview I conducted with Shelby Lee Adams on January 6, 1999.
3. Adams, p. 63.
4. Adams p. 25.

Mois de la Photo

Paris, November '98

Carolyn Richards

The 1998 version of *Mois de la Photo* included very powerful exhibitions within its confinement theme and some strong, though predictable shows in its event theme. The *Intimacy* theme included some charming, though mostly unstimulating offerings. While the organizers of the *Mois de la Photo* carefully chose the exhibitions to be included, there was not a guiding curatorial force uniting the exhibitions. There were no groundbreaking, thought-provoking exhibitions curated by festival organizers who also serve as leadership at the *Maison Européenne de la Photographie* (MEP).

One of the successful exhibitions at the MEP for this *Mois de la Photo* made a beautiful statement on the confinement theme. Klavdij Sluban, a Czech-born photographer living in France, spent several years working with youths in juvenile detention centers on the outskirts of Paris. He set up darkrooms in the prisons, taught photographic skills and encouraged photographic expression by the youths in detention. He collected their work and organized exhibitions. After working for seven years on the project, he also began photographing within the

extraordinary dedication to her photographic project. The photographer spent ten years on the project and photographed in more than 40 women's prisons throughout the United States, Europe and the former Soviet Union. She often lived in the prisons, was on the scene for several incidents and worked

extremely hard to get to know the women and their stories. The photos mirror the photographer's compassion for her subjects and her knowledge of their plight.

The large format of the black-and-white photographs effectively accentuates the harsh nature of the women's lives. Letters, newspaper articles and other artifacts enhance the exhibition in a subtle way. The show is accompanied by thoughtful introductions by exhibition curators

Gabriel Bauret and Robert Pledge. Informative text highlights a startling fact — 85 percent of the women in prison are there for killing or assaulting an abusive partner.

Another exhibition dealing with prisons suffered greatly in comparison to Atwood's. Andrew Lichtenstein was one of two photographers exhibited under a *carte blanche* given by *Mois de la Photo* to organizers of *Visa Pour l'Image*, a photojournalism festival in Perpignan, France. Lichtenstein's portrait of American prisons was weak and superficial. He begins his artistic statement by making excuses for this lack of depth — constant surveillance by guards, difficulty in

getting permission to photograph interiors, lack of contact with prisoners, editorial control by wardens. One wonders why he bothered at all. The emissaries from Perpignan were redeemed, in a visual sense, by Christopher Morris' photos of war and conflict throughout the world. He circles the globe jumping into many of the most intense conflicts and comes away with powerful, classic war photographs. However, one must examine his motivation, perspective and the actual message behind his photographs. Is he trying to push the horror of war into our consciousness in a new and creative way?



Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *Bowery Entertainers*, c. 1944

Does he have a responsibility to inform himself and us about the source or history of the conflict? Is he making judgments about the opposing political forces driving the conflict? Or is he simply trying to make powerful pictures? He succeeds at the latter but one is left to wonder about the rest.

Confinement was also disturbingly explored in a strong exhibition by Spaniard David Nebrada. Perhaps this exhibition was presented in the *Confinement* theme instead of the *Intimacy* theme because Nebrada pursued his work in isolation for over 20 years due to schizophrenia that has plagued him since adolescence. He carefully documented in a forthright way his tendency for self-mutilation. Knives, ropes, needles and self-starvation all figure in these carefully composed photographs. These images are difficult to view and one feels unwillingly drawn into a suffocating relationship with them.

Another Spanish exhibition was a second *carte blanche* given by the *Mois*

de la Photo directors to the *Primavera Fotográfica* festival of Barcelona. A great public relations opportunity for the Spanish festival was wasted in exhibiting photograms by Antoni Clavé at the Catalan cultural center. Even Joel Brar, Communications Director for *Mois de la Photo*, expressed his regrets concerning the exhibition and the liberties given to the *Primavera Fotográfica*. He said it was not photography but painting. This is not altogether accurate as they are photograms, on a base of photographic paper, with recognizable photographic elements (and some overused photogram clichés). They have been manipulated to the extent that the photographic chemicals have been masked off in places and swished around a bit, but not in such a manner as to have the profound impact described by exhibition curator Josep Miquel Garcia. He rather overstates his case in describing Clavé's work as "closer to Dada than to Constructivism — unwittingly connecting Man Ray's *Champs Délicieux* with his own 'Rayogrammes.'"

Other over-intellectualized concepts

were presented at two commercial galleries. The Galerie Baudoin Lebon, which is known for that sort of thing, exhibited photographer Patrick Bailly-Maitre-Grand's positive and negative photographs of antique mirrors side by side. Is this not a subtle way to reflect on the nature of intimacy? The Galerie Jean Pierre Lambert usually does small, insightful and carefully conceived



Eugene Smith, *Ouvrier portant des lunettes de protection*, 1955. The Heirs of Eugene Smith/Coli. Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, Tucson

solo shows of emerging international artists. Their choice for the festival's intimacy theme was particularly surprising.

Roselyne Pelaquier exhibits graphic black-and-white photograms of broken pieces of human skulls. The forms, resembling Japanese calligraphy, were monotonous and uninteresting.

Apart from Pelaquier's work, the intimacy theme yielded some predictable results. *Lovers* by Carole Bellaïche presented a couple in an intimate sexual context. The photographer took care to explain that nothing too graphic is shown and that the participants are photographed in low light conditions. This, in her view, makes for a much more "artistic" representation.

Continuing along this predictable trajectory, the intimacy theme included homages to muses/lovers, Edouard Boubat's *Lella* and Bernard Plossu's *Françoise*, both at the MEP. The MEP



Jane Evelyn Atwood, *Le "Parloir intérieur,"* 1991

walls of these centers. The exhibition seen at the MEP is a series of introspective black-and-white photos by several of the young people and some of Sluban's work. It is as much an expression of confinement as it is intimacy, especially in view of the time and effort Sluban invested in the lives of these young people.

The most powerful exhibitions were found, without a doubt, within the *Confinement* heading. The star exhibition of the festival was well worth the trip out to La Vilette on the edge of Paris. Jane Evelyn Atwood, with her exhibition, *Too Much Time — Women in Prison*, demonstrates

Klavdij Sluban, *Centre des Jeunes Détenus de Fleury-Mérogis*, 1997



EXHIBITIONS

Jane Evelyn Atwood, *Le sauna, Colonie pénale pour femmes*, 1990

also presented a large exhibition of the work of Yves Guillot. It included quiet, contemplative still lives and interiors that failed to make a stimulating statement about intimacy. The same ideas were presented more effectively in the work of Luigi Ghirri in an exhibition at the FNAC superstore. The installation was claustrophobic and glaringly lighted, but the color photos of interiors of Ghirri's residences and studios were warm and full of subtle emotion.

As might be expected, there were also nude studies within the *Intimacy* theme, including exhibitions of work by Yvonne le Marlec and Aurore de Sousa. Also, the

Belgian cultural center hosted a beautiful exhibition, including some nudes, of Belgian pictorialist Gustave Marissaux. These small images of melancholy young women, twilight landscapes and Italian atmosphere injected a note of nostalgic intimacy into a much more contemporarily oriented festival.

Intimate Fictions was a large, ambitious exhibition curated from the collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou, which is presenting exhibitions in alternative spaces during its renovation. This exhibition at the Espace Electra began extremely well with a self-portrait of Bayard, floating in water, posing as a drowned man. Un-

covering creativity of this kind so early in photographic history promised great things for the show. The exhibition did not quite live up to this promise, although there were many strong images.

The exhibition would have fared better had it not detoured from the strong fictional intimacy theme merely to showcase several impressively trendy pieces in the museum's permanent collection. Especially off the mark in this way were some staged photographs of Sandy Skoglund and William Wegman, banal images by Bettina Rheims and a perplexing piece by Mike and Doug Starn.

Intimate fiction failed to materialize in another exhibition. It was especially disappointing as it came from Duane Michals, an established master of intimate serial explorations. Adding wistful, enigmatic text from Walt Whitman to sensually photographed young men does nothing to enhance impact or relieve repetitiveness when the same series is shot 20 times over.

As might be expected, families were also explored. "You said families?", one of two exhibitions curated by independent curator/auction consultant Vivianne Esders, was a thoughtful collection of work by art photographers examining the family concept from many angles. While this exhibition does not quite measure up to some of the great shows she has curated in the past, including a well-researched look at contemporary Soviet photography, it does well in providing diverse ways of studying families. Her other exhibition is more of a historical waltz down memory lane for her and highlights her talent in spotting great work before it becomes widely known. She was one of the first to promote the work of Sandy Skoglund and Laurie Simmons and exhibited William Wegman's first color Polaroids in 1981. The show also included works by Toni Catany, Larry Fink and Gabrielle Basilico. While not very cohesive, the show made a statement about the quality of work with which she associates her-self and her long history of successful exhibition choices.

A delightful surprise came with *The Intimate Lebanon, Photographs 1850-1960*, presented at the Arab cultural institute. This large exhibition of vintage photos by local professional and amateur photographers presents a casual view of the evolution of Lebanese society through family portraits, snapshots, news photographs and studio portraits. Each carefully chosen image radiated humanity and emotion and sometimes fun and frivolity, too.

Two other countries were examined through exhibitions in the *Event* category of the festival. These were decidedly less successful than the Lebanese exhibition. From

of Switzerland 1848-1998 included an image from each of the 150 years in the title. Presented at the Swiss cultural institute, this overwhelming exhibition evoked reveries about what statement or point of view was being presented about the nation. Was this a public relations effort by the Swiss, with respect-able family portraits, efficient factories and heroic statesmen? Perhaps they threw in a few photos of civil unrest to mask the PR effort. Perhaps they had to also throw in a few luckless workers to balance out the idyllic mountain scenery. There were many fascinating images, but if the images had been chosen on a visual basis alone (and not according to this elusive conceptual criteria) it would have been more successful.

The second look at a national identity proved that the Soviet propaganda machine has not yet run out of steam. The exhibition, 1917-1991, *Soviet Photography Mirrors Its Time*, at the Pavilion des Arts was described as "a first attempt at a reconstitution of the great events of Russian and Soviet history through photographic images." It was co-curated by a Russian and a French curator and what goes unsaid is that the Russian curator only pulled photos out of the archives that toed the Communist party line. We have images of fiery oratorical



Marianne Cook, Nancy et Jessica Katz, Leah Posner, Susan et Rachel Pasternak, Los Angeles, CA, 1994

Lenin, gleaming war machinery, proud soldiers and workers, functional well-maintained buildings and assorted U. S. presidents shaking hands with Soviet leaders. The quality of the images is substandard, understandable since "undesirables" were systematically removed from historical photos. Moscow looked much better in the historical show *Old Moscow in Photos* at the Musée Carnavalet. It included appealing hand-tinted vintage architectural and street scenes.

The *Event* suite of exhibitions also provided an in-depth look at a greatly under-reported armed conflict. An exhibition of clandestine photos by Swiss photographer Michael von Graffenreid, *Algeria, Photographs of a War Without Images*, was a very ambitious project that included over one hundred photos taken over a period of seven years in Algeria. It did not graphically document massacres or some of the more horrific incidents in Algeria's civil war so much as it documented the lives of the people affected by the conflict. In order to fully comprehend the impact of the exhibition, it was necessary to study an exhaustive timeline and text at the beginning of the exhibition, with numerous trips back to the text for reference. (Text interspersed with the images would have made more sense.) Given the lack of images concerning this ongoing conflict, the exhibition offered a rare opportunity for better understanding the political sit-

Nabil, *Jeune Détenu de Fleury-Mérogis*, 1995



Jane-Evelyn Atwood, *Le couffin du bébé d'une prisonnière devant les portes des cellules*. Centre Pénitentiaire de femmes, Marseilles, 1991

uation, and bringing more international attention to the frequent violence and civil unrest. The photographs were taken clandestinely because photographs or photographic equipment are forbidden in Algeria with unpleasant or even fatal consequences if discovered.

The *Event* theme also included a comprehensive, evocative, if not groundbreaking exhibition at the Hotel Sully of the work of W. Eugene Smith. The exhibition ostensibly focused on his "personal" essays, many never before exhibited. However, many of the images were in fact

familiar from previous exhibitions and books on his work. Another predictable (but comprehensive and well-presented) inclusion in the *Event* category was a large exhibition at the MEP of the work of Weegee. This show, organized by the ICP, was also very comprehensive and nicely presented. These shows, well known to Americans as part of the American photographic legacy, are perhaps not so well known to the rest of the world so their inclusion could be considered more insightful in the French context.

An inexplicably strong presence at the

festival was Johan van der Keuken, a guest of honor. He had three disparate installations in a retrospective exhibition at the Netherlands institute; films showing at the national gallery Jeu de Paume; three installations at the MEP; and one large piece installed at the Maison de l'Amérique latine. The work was so diverse as to make it difficult to evaluate his supposed contribution to the photographic oeuvre.

The most successful piece, installed at the Maison de l'Amérique Latine, was a black-and-white photo collage frieze of images from La Paz, Bolivia. This piece caught some of the chaotic movement on the streets of this Latin American city. However, it is difficult to discern any connection to the city other than a touristic one. Van der Keuken's pieces at the MEP were not as visually stimulating. *Amsterdam - Two Streets* attempted a similar contrasting jumble of images as the La Paz piece but because it deals with a modern city, it comes across as a lesser imitation of William Klein's work in New York. The exhibition, *Sarajevo/November 1983-November 1993*, had an interesting premise. One young woman in Sarajevo made a point to see all of the films projected during a film festival hosted there during the war. This task involved all sorts of adventures involving gunfire, lack of transport and checkpoints. Van der Keuken's way of presenting this experience was totally ineffective. Simultaneous videos of the young woman droning on about her philosophy of life (as opposed to her experiences of the film festival) and film of the streets of Sarajevo during the war competed for attention with an elaborate metal grid-work that had large photos of bombed out buildings on it. The tragedy of the war was lost in the confusion of the installation. Van der Keuken's third piece at the MEP was a film made of his sister, Joke, in the week preceding her death from cancer. It also included still photos of her. The installation provided a relatively effective vehicle for contemplation of one's own mortality, yet the unrealized, stated goal of the installation was a comment on moving images and still photos as metaphor for life and death.

Another unexplained event was the exclusion of a very well-attended historical exhibition on the building of the first line of the Paris Metro. This exhibition at the *Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal* carefully documented progress and the construction methods that used an extraordinary amount of ingenuity, manpower and sometimes draft horses. Each contemporary contact print from the original glass negative had a carefully composed explanatory text that the crowds were studying with great interest. One can only assume politics kept this event out of the *Mois de la Photo* literature.

The festival was an ambitious undertaking and provided inspiration and stimulation. The organizers are to be applauded. However, a stronger curatorial voice could have been heard. The curatorial view of the MEP, which serves as the center for the *Mois de la Photo*, set the tone for the festival. The mission of the MEP is stated in its distribution of gallery space. A full 78 percent is devoted to exhibition of their permanent collections and exhibitions organized by the MEP. The exhibitions organized by the MEP tend in large part to be the "big names" in French photography such as Bernard Plossu and Edouard Boubat presented for this *Mois de la Photo*. There is eight percent devoted to "historic and scientific exhibitions." That leaves 13 percent for "the most current research in contemporary photography" (a space not used for its intended purpose this time with the homage to Johann van der Keuken). There is only one percent of the space for



El Khoury-Pharaoh/FAI, *El Hadath*, ca. 1925. Fouad El Khoury/Coll

"young artists" who must use the space alternately with current work by photo-journalists. This small space was used for this *Mois de la Photo* for an exhibition of work by Jim Dine, who is not exactly youthful. With this heavy emphasis on well-established photographers, there is not a lot of support for exploration of more contemporary themes or of work by younger or more experimental artists.

With the remarkable facility, large staff and budget of the MEP, great things are bound to happen. Perhaps future *Mois de la Photo* festivals will follow a different, bolder course charted by leadership at the MEP.

Carolyn Richards, former staff member at HCP, now lives in the South of France with her husband and daughter.

Eugene Smith, *Maud dans l'attente de sa délivrance*, 1951. The Heirs of Eugene Smith/Coll. Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona, Tucson.



A Conversation with Fernando Castro

REASONS OF STATE
SICARDI-SANDERS GALLERY
SEPTEMBER 10–OCTOBER 18, 1998

Johannes Birringer

The Berlin Wall came tumbling down in 1989, triggering a whole series of uprisings and revolutions that changed our political landscape. In the same year, the democracy movement in China was crushed by governmental force. As the whole world was watching, we consumed numerous media images that crystallized political or racial conflict in contemporary societies. Not all of them linger in our subconscious, but some stand out because they capture our imagination like the masked face of subcomandante Marcos or the single Chinese man who blocked with his own body the march of the tanks on Tiananmen Square.

Fernando Castro's new exhibition of photographic works-in-progress, *Reasons of State*, is both an artistic and a philosophical meditation on precisely this dilemma of the (anonymous) individual facing larger, often equally anonymous or irrefutable forces of "rationality" employed in the name and service of state interests.

Citizens of the rational state can claim the protection of their civil and human rights, but transgressions of these rights occur everywhere, and in most cases violence and victimization are neither random nor irrational. Castro's *Reasons of State* is a profoundly disturbing exhibition that offers no answers or explanations — it does not document the dialectic of state terror and individual acts of resistance, nor does it simply illustrate the antagonisms between normative rationality and individual freedom, public and private interests, law-enforcement and violence in law. Rather, it probes the philosophical and existential quandary of the opposition between state power and the individual, with either side claiming acts of legitimization that could be interpreted as erroneous. Interpretation, in fact, matters, because photography in this case neither reveals nor indicts — it exposes a certain futility. Futility is a predictable cliché that photography has trouble admitting.

Castro's photographs are several steps removed from documentary and realist representation. Beautifully composed and executed, the *Wang Series* and the *Kotosh-kotosh Series*, together with three separate prints titled in Spanish (*El Desenmascaramiento*, *La Leyenda Negra* and *Padre e Hijo*, *Identificados*) and obliquely referring to issues of identity/identification, are carefully manipulated photographic prints or installation works, as in the case of *No Conocian La Rueda Ni La Escritura* and *The Red Carpet*. The *Wang Series*, in particular, offers a multifaceted examination of the point of view of the man who faced the tanks on Tiananmen Square. All the images in the exhibition are staged, and they provocatively reframe the question of the mask/identity of power (in a global contemporary political context) by repeating the standpoint of the questioner —



Fernando Castro, *Black Hole*, from the *Wang Series*, 1998

the increasingly diminished space of the body. The body is faced with a violent encroachment upon its space, the space of the impotent gaze, hands bound. The powerless witness, of course, becomes an icon: "Wang" is the icon of the imponderable question.

The following is a conversation with Fernando Castro in November 1998, at Sicardi-Sanders Gallery.

Birringer: How do you see your work's direction at this point in your career as a photographer and writer?

Castro: My role as a curator and critic has made me more self-conscious and demanding of myself. It has also turned me into a learner. My training as a photographer is almost exclusively the result of trying to understand and interpret other photographers' work. I have also learned from printing the work of others and from the exhibits I have curated.

Here at Sicardi-Sanders I curated a show of Geraldo de Barros, the Brazilian photographer, who in the late 1940s had manipulated negatives, cut them, pasted them, scraped them — his work touched me very deeply. It taught me to stop regarding the photographic print and negative as something immaculate, not to be touched.

When I saw this man's work who had done all this manipulation in the 1940s, he liberated me and encouraged me to go back to my instincts to manipulate and to bring different realities back into the image.

Reasons of State also marks another position I take with regard to Latin American photography specifically. A lot of Latin American photography is very successful because it is exotic in this country which is the main market for it. There has always been this hunger for the exotic object, and I take distance. I feel uncomfortable with certain images of indigenous people; they are not only not in the best interest of the people being photo-

graphed, but also they do ill service to many Latin American photographers whose work does not pursue exotic imagery. The success of ethnic imagery is a pyrrhic victory, because the photographer as thinker is dismantled. The producer of that imagery becomes a smuggler, like people who smuggle pre-Columbian art or species of tropical fish or plants from the Amazon.

Birringer: How does your self-distancing translate into the political content of your current work?

Castro: *Reasons of State* alludes to the justifications that people in power use to perpetrate violations of human rights. For "reasons of state," we are obliged to close down your newspaper; we cannot allow you to show this movie; for "reasons of state" we will execute you. Reason is a malleable substance; as a philosopher, of course I have to be committed to reason — but not as something unalterable but as a principle. When you commit to it, you are going to think about matters in certain ways that are truthful and persuasive, you will not seek obscurity but try to regard the natural world and the human world with the respect they deserve.

In *Reasons of State*, "reason" is meant in a narrow use "as means to an end." In this case the state uses violence as means to secure itself, and this is a leitmotif of the whole exhibit, whether we are dealing with indigenous issues, as is the *Kotosh-kotosh Series* or the *Wang Series* about the image of a man standing before the tanks during the Tiananmen revolt. They are connected. The theme is the individual whenever he confronts a tyrannical organization, whether it is the state, a corporation or peer pressure and social conventions. The individual has to confront the power of organized human beings, at whatever cost.

Kotosh-kotosh takes stance against this issue of exoticism I mentioned. The name refers to an archaeological site discovered in Peru some 30 years ago by a Japanese archaeological expedition investigating the

Eastern slope of the Andes, an unexplored region also believed to have some of the oldest sites in Peru. They discovered a temple with very few vestiges; but they did find these bas-reliefs made out of a kind of plaster, and there were these two sets of hands at each side of the entrance. I was fascinated by these hands.

Of course, I didn't have access to the real plaster hands, so I staged them. I painted hands white like plaster, put them on a white background, again like plaster to imitate the bas-relief, and photographed them, one set in very strong sunlight, the other in subdued light. I titled them contrary to expectation: *Summer* and *Winter*. *Summer* is the one with the subdued light because in the Andean region, where the plaster hands were actually found, people do not call summer or winter according to the position of the sun but rather according to whether it rains or doesn't rain. It rains when the sun is in the southern hemisphere, and so they call it winter. *Summer* and *Winter* take a stance against the exotic imagery by showing how the facts about the world they purport to depict may be exactly the opposite of what they assume in their representation.

Birringer: What does *No Conocian La Rueda Ni La Escritura* actually mean?

Castro: *No Conocian La Rueda Ni La Escritura*. It represents an event that occurs about 3,700 years after the plaster hands of Kotosh-kotosh were made: the execution of José Gabriel Condorcanqui better known as Tupac Amaru. This man was a kind of Ghandi. In fact, he was trying to tell the Spanish authorities to respect the laws that were in effect. Ironically, the Spanish, who were very brutal in the treatment of indigenous people in the Latin continent, were also the people who produced some of the first philosophers like Vittoria who conceived that people throughout the world had something like human rights, regardless of their race or religion. It is one of those ironies of Humanism, and later of the Enlightenment, which I try to pursue in my imagery. I didn't want to title the work directly after Tupac Amaru; I chose a title from the story we were often told in school as part of the learning of official history. We were told that the Incas built powerful fortresses; they built the platforms where they cultivated corn and other foodstuffs around the Andes; they discovered metallurgy, and so on. However, we were taught that they didn't have a written language and they didn't know the wheel.

Birringer: Why would they need wheels?

Castro: Exactly, they had to climb mountains with no flat roads. If you travel across the Andes, you realize how useless the wheel is. But the centerpiece of the installation is a circle, the city of Cusco, Qosqo in the Quechua language, which means navel. The city of Qosqo was the center of the Inca empire. I took the wheel as a symbol of what they didn't know, and that circle is also on other images. It's a circular image inscribed in a rectangle, and it is called *The Black Legend* (*La Leyenda Negra*). In the oral history of the Conquest there are two lines of interpretation: the white legend says how good the Spanish were bringing civilization to the continent and how bad the indigenous people were. The black legend says the opposite. Anyway, those hands called *La Leyenda Negra* continue the series of *Kotosh-kotosh*, and another image is called *Entrance to the Valley of Lima*. Lima is the city the Spanish founded, now the capital

of Peru. My photograph shows the entrance from the mountains, where most indigenous people in Peru live. It shows makeshift houses of interwoven hay, as most shanty towns in Lima are made.

One of the things I am doing in this exhibit is to appeal to different sources of contemporary life or to historical texts, rather than to the typical sources of exotic imagery, like folk life or peculiar religions. I think those images have their place only as ethnography rather than art. My sources are different, they are the media, and they are historical images.

I was in Peru in 1989 when the image of the man facing the tanks was broadcast all over the world. Peru at the time was in the grip of the Shining Path, and here I was, in a place where this Maoist terrorist group was trying to impose in Peru the kind of ideology which the Chinese man who stood in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square was directly opposing. The original image was taken by photographer Stuart Franklin, it was actually a video at first. It fascinated me; the video footage is like a dance. At that time in Peru, another version of a dance was broadcast, a dance

Birringer: Can photography actually make comments on rationality, on state politics? Can photography reveal anything or appeal anything? How large is the gap? Now someone might ask why are you appropriating this particular American media image from/about China, why are you doing a Wang series?

Castro: It addresses the issues of exoticism. Wang does not only belong to the Chinese but to anybody for whom he is a symbol. Wang is the symbol of a universally shared value against tyranny.

Birringer: You consider yourself an international artist. You don't consider yourself limited to an ethnic particularity.

Castro: No, I wouldn't say that there are not certain ethnic traits in my work, I am aware of them, follow them, for better or worse. I suppose my contact with the world has not only been from the town or the city. I cross borders, and I have been across languages, through literature, through exposure to the media. One of the projects I have in mind is a series about the Berlin wall—I have never been in Germany, but the Berlin wall, like the Wall of China, is a universal icon.

reluctant and I respect that. It was very hard to find another model though. Finally one day I met a man in a bookstore who was a Chinese from Malaysia, and although he was reluctant, he agreed to help me.

It led me to think about the issue of being identified by the state or by anyone who uses that knowledge of identifying an individual to do harm to him or her. I made these other images, like the one about subcomandante Marcos. When the Mexican media claimed they had identified him, there was this incredible image, where they had this mask overlaid on a man's face and they flip the mask back and forth. It is weird, because you don't identify people putting a mask back on them. The logic seemed reversed, so I made this image (*Desenmascaramiento*), and I also used my dental X-ray in one image, because that is what is used for identifying people whose bodies are found.

Birringer: Yes, I saw this in a film on the desaparecidos in Argentina, it seemed a macabre process that they are building this archive of X-rays to identify bodies, to have

sioned people might think of it as a negative image, because seldom do you think of tanks as white. All of that interested me, I wanted to have a tank as a symbol of power, of violence, as something that would threaten you, threaten this particular man and anyone who would look at this image. So you can say, well these images are staged. I use actors in some cases, and in others, I use toys. Eventually, I found a real Sherman tank in San Francisco and photographed it. But I like the negative-looking image; it allowed me to focus directly on the image at hand, manipulate the image, scrape the negatives, paint them.

Birringer: What was your conceptual plan of creating these repeated mirror relationships? There is the man in the landscape of traces of power, but in Reality Gap the actor is facing his own icon, so to speak.

Castro: This is the reality gap. These are issues that go beyond the Wang Series. It is not Wang viewing himself; no, it is the actor viewing whomever that was. This is an image created by the media.

Birringer: It has become hyperreal, although it is authentic.

Castro: It lives in the world of media.

Birringer: The actor is more real than that image.

Castro: Well, in a sense, but then again the other one is more real because he is not acting.

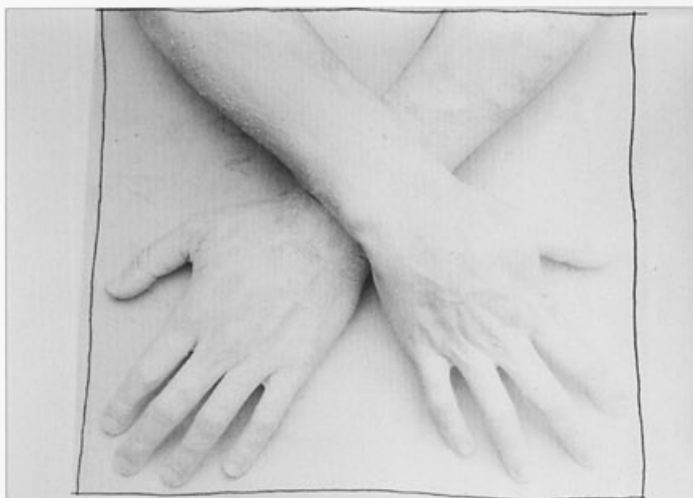
Birringer: The model is looking at a fantasy, because the media operate in the US as an entertainment industry, right?

Castro: Yes, in a way, but there are important images; think of those we got of the Vietnam War at the time. Even the recent Gulf War, it wasn't real except for what the media gave us. If you talk about real in terms of what is real in a tangible way that affects your life, images in the media in this country are what makes you feel, what makes you react, modify your behavior according to them, so how more real can something be? They have to be ontologically important.

Birringer: How have Chinese viewers reacted to your exhibition?

Castro: A Chinese journalist wrote a review for a Chinese-American newspaper specifically noticed this small work because *Quotations of Chairman Mao* was the most influential book in China. I designed this box with mirrors, so that there would be infinite reflections; it is also illuminated with neon light. I was interested in this quality of light that would make it look like a coffin, like a mausoleum. I also wanted it to be ambivalent: it can look like an altar. I used to have the book in English—it disappeared. My mother threw it away when I was arrested in Peru, because one of the things they threatened me with was that they would go to my house and look at the books I read. I had a lot of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara, the whole deal. I was reading them, in fact I believed in some of these ideals. I no longer believe in many of them. I still believe in some.

Johannes Birringer is a Houston-based choreographer/filmmaker and artistic director of AlienNation Co.



Fernando Castro, *Verano (Summer)*, from the *Kotosh-kotosh* Series, 1997



Fernando Castro, *Padre y Hijo, Identificados*, 1998

by the cohorts of Guzmán, dressed in military outfits. I don't know whether they were dancing to street music or whether the music was added afterwards, but here they were dancing to the music of *Zorba the Greek*. In the meantime, they were perpetrating all kinds of hideous crimes.

I am working on some of these images of Shining Path. I want to take a stance as an individual against this terror, because it is not only the dissenter that is in the right, sometimes it is also the state that is in the right. I am taking a stance against these dissenters, as terrorists, against subversion, which in many cases I am sympathetic to, and this is what philosophy usually illuminates, namely, the ambivalent nature of subversion. For example, if you are a member of Baader-Meinhof, I am against you; if you are fighting against apartheid, I may very well be on your side.

In the case of Wang, this person who stood before the tank (I call him Wang because my Chinese source told me his name was Wang, whereas *Time Magazine* argued the person was unknown), the stories about what happened to him also conflict. Some say he was executed shortly afterwards; some say that they don't know who he was and what happened to him; some say the soldier in the tank that stopped was also executed. I am trying to show the human side, all the victims; the man in the tank may also have been a victim of the reasons of state.

Birringer: What is the power of photography vis-à-vis the power of the state?

Castro: Of course it is not much, but certainly it is troubling to some states that the Stuart Franklin image went around the world. The original performance of Wang, its image, has become an icon, like many other famous images that photography has produced, and perhaps I have become sensitive to many such icons, and want to explore them, without hurting anyone.

Birringer: And the model?

Castro: Well, there is a whole story about the man, in fact the relationship I had with the model ended up generating other branches of this exhibition. Originally, a woman friend had told me her brother was coming to Houston from China.

Birringer: And he'd love to model.

Castro: Yes, and he'd love to do that, and he would bring me the bag that Wang was carrying, because it is a particular bag from the Chinese army, my only piece of authentic material in the restaging. But when he came here, his Chinese friends told him, "Oh no, don't do this, it's dangerous." Mind you, I was only trying to photograph his back. Then I thought, well, the Chinese have all these different knowledges, like acupuncture, maybe they have a way to identify people by the pattern of their hair or maybe by their ears. So I understand that this person may be

a computer file with dental registers.

Castro: Political imagery does have consequences for those who participate in the imagery. People can make you responsible as a producer of the images.

Birringer: How do you understand the notion of photography as testimony? Or is your work more conceptual, as it stages reality, fabricates traces?

Castro: One of the things I have realized in my voyage as a photographer or researcher is that the borderlines between styles and modes of photography are not that important. What is important is what you want to do with them. For example, I was conscious that I wanted to restage this image of Stuart Franklin; it had been in my mind, like *Kotosh-kotosh*, for many years. I had drawn it; I had done all the variations; and then I had to face the fact that in Houston there are no tanks. I went to an army base, and the captain told me, "Sorry, there are no tanks."

Some people said, your images remind me of Levinthal's work, the artist who did the images of the Holocaust using small toys. Well, yes, but only by accident. I really wanted to photograph real tanks, but I couldn't; so I ended up having to look for model tanks. The first I found is actually a model of a Soviet tank. I found it very appealing in the blurred way it was photographed; it is actually more threatening as it becomes abstract. I also found a UN tank, which was white. So I envi-

EXHIBITIONS

BRASSAÏ: THE EYE OF PARIS
DECEMBER 6, 1998 -
FEBRUARY 28, 1999,
THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
HOUSTON

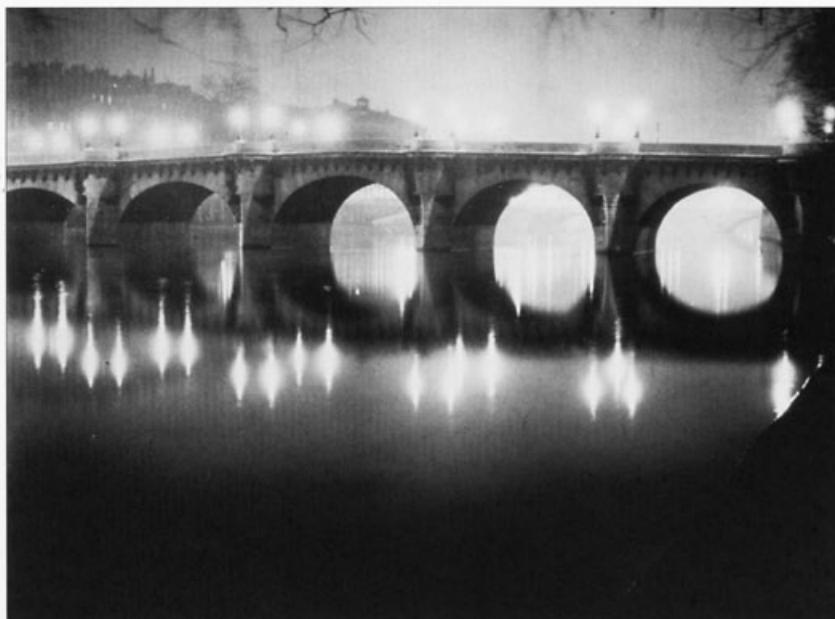
Celeste Roberts Lewis

Much like a talented actor who gets type-cast into one role, Brassai is known almost exclusively as a photographer of the Parisian night and demimonde of the 1930s. However, Brassai never intended to spend his artistic career as a photographer, much less a photographer of such limited vision, and his range as both an artist and photographer is much broader than is generally known. Brassai was a true polymath with endless ideas and unlimited ambition. He was, in turn, a painter, a draftsman, a journalist, a set designer, a chronicler, a poet, a writer, a director and a sculptor. His working methods — especially in his various photographic series — were methodical: carefully planned, documented and interrelated.

These little-celebrated aspects of Brassai are the focus of *Brassai: The Eye of Paris*, his first retrospective in this country since John Szarkowski's at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968. In its various venues and incarnations, the event will span the year that marks the centennial of the artist's birth. The version that closed at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston on February 28, 1999, featured 138 photographs, several examples of drawings and sculptures and first editions of the 17 books Brassai published. *Brassai: The Eye of Paris* reopened, in an edited form (25–30 photos were cut and all 17 books), at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles from April 13 to July 4, 1999, and, in its entirety, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC from October 17, 1999, to January 16, 2000. Some of the photographs in the show have not been exhibited since Brassai's last retrospective, have not been published since the 1950s, and are now effectively unknown. Although many of Brassai's books are still in print, the editions in the exhibition are extremely rare. *Picasso and Company*, originally published in French as *Conversations avec Picasso*, is being republished by the University of Chicago, 35 years after its first appearance.

Brassai: The Eye of Paris is accompanied by a catalogue of the same title, to be published in the fall of 1999. The catalogue includes a substantial essay, *Brassai: Man of the World*, by Anne Tucker, the Houston museum's curator of photography, who has devoted much of the last 15 years to researching Brassai. Tucker's essay is filled with new research and insights into the artist. In addition, the catalogue contains an interview with Brassai by art historian Avis Berman, never before published in this unedited version, and an essay by Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Richard Howard, surveying Brassai's work as a writer.

Gyula Halász was born in Brassov, Hungary (now Romania) in 1899. He was raised by a literary francophile and the influence, on both counts, never left him. His ambitions to become a great painter were bolstered by art schools in both Budapest and Berlin while he scratched out a living — supplemented by a stipend from home — as a reporter for Hungarian, and later, German illustrated magazines. When he was able to move to Paris in 1924, he added French magazines to his list of clients but was still determined to glorify his family name in oil on canvas. Believing himself a hack, he often used



Brassai. Pont-Neuf, Paris, 1949 © Gilberte Brassai



Brassai, Saint-Germain-des-Près, Paris, 1949 © Gilberte Brassai

BRASSAÏ: The Reluctant Photographer

Brassai. Napoleon in Front of an Antique Shop, French Quarter, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1957 © Gilberte Brassai



Serge Hambourg. L'Atelier de Brassai, 1985 © Gilberte Brassai with funds provided by members of the Photography Subcommittee

Brassai, Parisian, Masked Ball at Pré Catelan, Bois de Boulogne, 1946 © Gilberte Brassai





Montparnasse Church, Paris, 1939 © Gilberte Brassai



Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase in honor of S.J. Morris.

Brassai, *Henri Miller in My Doorway, Hotel des Terrasses, Paris, 1931-1932* © Gilberte Brassai



pseudonyms for his articles and eventually stuck with Brassai, a generic and anonymous term meaning "from Brassov."

By 1929, he had spent four years in the bohemian milieu of Montparnasse and had not touched a paintbrush since his arrival. Instead, he had wandered from dusk till dawn through every boulevard and back street of Paris. With fellow night owl Henry Miller, among others, he absorbed images of cafes and cabarets, prostitutes and policemen, monuments and bridges, cemeteries and cathedrals. Intoxicated by the activities of *les années folles* (the roaring 20s and perhaps a cocktail or two, he scarcely evaded destitution with his checks from home and his journalism.

of 30, Brassai began to take the photographs himself.

Brassai's intentions as a photographer were not drawn from the history of photography nor from the technical aspects of the medium. Instead, he claimed as his forefathers draftsmen and painters: Constantin Guys, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Rembrandt van Rijn, Katsushika Hokusai, Francisco de Goya and Honoré Daumier. Brassai traced his lineage through these great chroniclers, artists who were able to distill the essence of their times. Artists who could be described as realists, but realists with the gift of seeing the poetic in the everyday. Brassai felt that



Gilberte Brassai, *Brassai Photographing the Parisian Night on the Boulevard Saint-Jacques, with his 6 x 9 Voigtlander, 1931-32* © Gilberte Brassai

not visual artists at all, but the great writers, Johann von Goethe and Marcel Proust. He did as Goethe had done before him, shedding his romantic self in favor of a more enduring classicism. Throughout Brassai's *oeuvre* there is one common strand: form. Brassai was a true formalist with a classical bent. Many scholars have positioned Brassai among the Surrealists. Tucker argues against this narrowing of Brassai's intentions. Certainly the Surrealists were attracted to many of Brassai's photographs and Brassai did turn up in their publications — as he did in innumerable others. Still, the classical stability of Brassai's photographs allow them to hold up to numerous interpretations.

This is proved, not only by the varying captions different magazines applied to the same photograph, but also by their ability to stand alone, without explication.

Also like Goethe, Brassai knew that, "it would be useless — to try to express in words the being of any phenomenon. But what can be observed is the way it behaves, and a complete account of this would presumably describe its being. Make a survey of all of man's activities, and a picture of his character will emerge." This shared conviction may, in part, explain Brassai's working methods. Having acquired his camera, Brassai did not wander the streets looking for subjects, but rather planned in advance where and what he would be photographing. When his envisioned image could not be found, he set it up, and often had friends pose in what appear to be — and are often mistaken for — voyeuristic or spontaneous shots. Many of Brassai's photographs are cinematic in the sense that he directed and posed them. As Tucker writes: "He considered his photographs to be unsuccessful only if they were unconvincing. His attitude was similar to that of a novelist or a filmmaker who is seeking to create convincing characters in a fictional setting." Or as Brassai put it: "I invent nothing. I imagine everything." Thus his emphasis on realism was tempered by his focus on poetic and artistic form.

These preconceived images were executed with the idea that they would become part of a specific series. In turn, each of these series were part of yet a larger plan — a work in progress — which, at the time of his death, included 44 separate series of pictures containing untold subseries and individual photographs. As Tucker explains it: "His goal was not only to make great individual pictures — but to produce a cohesive project, which was itself part of a grander plan."

To this end, the exhibition is arranged according to Brassai's own categorical classifications of these series. Under French law, scholars have limited access to certain photographs and archives and, because of French copyright laws, getting permission for their reproduction and use is difficult at best. Considering these limitations, Ms. Tucker has done an exceptional job in both her exhibition and catalogue of showing Brassai's range and methods as a creator.

The viewer passes through *Paris, Night* and *Secret Paris* and then on to

The many years spent as a journalist served as Brassai's introduction to photography. To make extra money, he collected and sold photographs and directed other photographers to take pictures for his articles, often pictures that he set up or even posed for himself. One of these photographers was Andre Kertész, a fellow Hungarian and a veteran photographer. Kertész's photography helped Brassai to overcome his distaste for the medium: "I discovered how much this 'spiritless and soulless mechanism,' this 'technical process,' had enriched man's means of expression." Finally, at the age

by picking up the camera he was carrying on this great tradition in an appropriately modern medium.

In 1932 he published his first book, *Paris de Nuit* (*Paris by Night*), a watershed book in the history of photography. This famous series had resulted from years of nighttime wanderings through the recently electrified, "City of Lights." During this time he also began work on another series eventually titled, *Le Paris Secret des Années 30s* (*The Secret Paris of the 30s*), published as a book in 1976. Apart from arguments concerning Surrealist aspects of Brassai's work, these two series — the former of nocturnal Paris, the latter, of the city's demimonde — have been the focus of Brassai scholarship. Tucker, however, devotes less than a third of her show to these, attempting instead to present the whole artist and to return to his own intentions.

As Tucker points out in her essay, the two greatest influences on Brassai were

the lesser known series. Examples of Brassai's drawings and sculpture accent *Nudes*. *Society* highlights Brassai's classical compositions of which the statuesque Parisienne is a good example. *Portraits* contains a majority of full-faced shots of writers and artists, the sitters' eyes meeting the glare of the camera's lens, a glimpse of the sitters' soul, for better or worse.

Picasso was photographed so often that he merited his own category. His section also contains pictures of his sculpture, a series that Brassai published as a book in 1949. The last photo in this section is a skull-like object, pock-marked by naturally occurring divots in the rock from which it was carved. It has a primitively hacked mouth and gouged-out eyes, its nose a ditch. This piece creates a interesting segue into the *Graffiti* section with its primitive mask-like carvings from the walls of Paris. The first to greet us is a primitive cousin of Picasso's *Death's Head* from the *Birth of Man* subseries. The same gouged-out eyes testify to the kinship and underscore Brassai's argument that these graffiti were indeed examples of urban sculpture. Similarly the *Arts* section shows examples of Brassai's found sculptures including objects that range from shoelaces to loaves of bread to giant stone carvings.

Often it is what cannot be seen that is most intriguing. An example is the untitled nude from 1931-1932. Fully half the picture is of a black curtain that conceals the right breast of the model's "Lolita" body, satin-trimmed panties shining. Her left breast is barely revealed by a raised hand pulling the curtain to hide her face and to reveal only a few curls at the back of her head. This "hidden" quality is also found in *My Newspaper Vendor 1948* from *Paris, Day*. The vendor appears to be a kindly old man, but Brassai does not allow his eyes tell his story: they are completely obscured by the reflection of his round glasses. This effect, not only leaves one guessing about the man, but also relates the picture formally to the circular, vacant-eyed faces of the *Graffiti* series.

Brassai's "survey of all man's activities" was not limited to his observations with the camera. It is said that Brassai had a photographic memory and began to take "photographs" long before aided by the camera. He also applied this gift in other areas. His famous book on Picasso is not a biography in the traditional sense, but rather a collection of what Brassai observed and heard in Picasso's presence. The two were good friends from 1932 until Picasso's death in 1973. Fascinated by Picasso, Brassai must have begun to make notes of their conversations shortly after they met. Thirty years later, Brassai showed Picasso a box labeled, *Conversations avec Picasso* (Conversations with Picasso), and upon Picasso's insistence Brassai published his notes as a book. Scholars of both Brassai and Picasso will tell you that this book is invaluable and Picasso himself said, "If you want to understand me, read Brassai's book."

Brassai published many types of books, including two books of poetry, the above-mentioned chronicle of Picasso, and two similarly-styled books about Henry Miller. Some of his books contain only photographs, like *Paris de Nuit*, for example, but more often they contain text by Brassai that complements the images and illuminate his subjects. These books



Brassai, *Shop Window, Paris, 1931-1932* © Gilberte Brassai



Brassai, *Isere Valley, French Alps, 1937* © Gilberte Brassai

include: *Séville en Fête* (Fiesta in Seville), *Graffiti*, *Le Paris Secret des Années 30* and *Les Artistes de Ma Vie* (The Artists of My Life), the last book Brassai published before his death in 1984. Recently, however, another Brassai book appeared, *Marcel Proust: Sous l'emprise de la Photographie* (Marcel Proust: Under the Influence of Photography) and perhaps Brassai's widow, Gilberte, is hoarding other surprises.

During World War II when it was difficult to get supplies, Brassai began to draw again. He also tried his hand at set design for the ballet and theater. Between 1945 and 1950, he designed sets for two plays and two ballets. Later, in 1956, he won a special prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his only film, *Tant Qu'il y Aura les Bêtes*, a 22-minute short with an original score by Louis Bessière. The stars of his film are the animals of the Vincennes Zoo, but he makes no commentary, nor does he subject them to Disneyfication. Rather, like all his subjects, he allows the animals to just be, adding only form and poetry to what is already innate in their characters. Tucker suggests that Brassai made only one film because he "had wanted to prove to himself that he could make a film. That done, there was a long list of other challenges to address."

Late in life, when Brassai was no longer able to tote his heavy photographic equipment around the city and world, he focused on other activities. He began sculpting and spent the last 17 years of his life writing. In a recent article about Brassai, Vicki Goldberg retells a story of a party where Jacques Lang, the French Minister of Culture, comments, "Brassai is a very great photographer." And François Mitterrand replies, "He is, above all, a very fine writer."

Rumanian historian Andor Horváth has pointed out that Brassai "did not become an artist as a photographer, but chose photography as an artist." For Tucker, "This explains why he readily shifted from photography to drawing to sculpture to writing to film when he felt one particular medium was better suited to what he had to say. Brassai does not fit easily into the history of photography in part because he never considered himself a photographer."

Early on, Brassai received acclaim for his photographs of Paris at night, at the time an elective means to an end. He had intended to immortalize his family name with his paintings; instead he immortalized his pseudonym with his photographs. Photography may have turned out to be what Brassai is remembered for, and perhaps rightly so. But to truly understand his intentions as a both a photographer and an artist it is necessary to consider his entire output as a creator. This exhibition and catalogue are terrific places to start.

Celeste Roberts Lewis is a freelance writer on sabbatical from graduate studies in art history at Rice University.

STILL TIME

Photographs by Sally Mann

AUSTIN MUSEUM OF ART -
LAGUNA GLORIA, AUSTIN, TEXAS
SEPTEMBER 6–NOVEMBER 8, 1998

Louis Dobay

One of the hallmarks of the postmodern sensibility is the mixing of previously disparate elements into a new, seemingly unified whole that temporizes the image, marking it as contemporary, but that nonetheless defies specific time.

In one early photograph in the exhibition, *Still Time*, of photographs by Sally Mann, the rudiments of this sensibility, that is a quality found in pictures of her family in later work, is dominant. A low stone wall bisects the picture plane horizontally and is the primary image in the frame. Crossing this line is an electrical power line pole support that is covered with a white collar and that is connected to the ground and ascends to the top



Mann's interest in the structure of identity becomes fully realized in images of her children. It is in this way archeological in the way that Foucault would have used the term. The images hearken the viewer into a metaphysical feeling, a quality of mind in which the structure of metaphor is evoked, and as in her pictures of her children at such a vulnerable age and in stark nakedness. In those photographs the children are posed so as to represent issues of identity and intentionality and self-conception. They almost defy our civilizationally pervasive subject-object dualities. We are challenged in viewing this mother's depiction of her children to play a child's game, but one which adults also play, of negotiating the world and insist-

would be concerned with self-identity; those roles would be pre-determined and static, unchanging and unassailable.

In this portrait we perhaps recall the mythic Jackie Kennedy facing the role of mother after the events of 1963. The use of stony children's heads skirts the issue of narcissism that was the metaphor for the Greek decline. To see people as objects, but moreover to represent them in stone is, in the golden age uplifting and noble, but representation degenerates in the later period into images of objects which have no soul, no inner life, no concept outside themselves, and no organic sense of self which can extrapolate "otherness" or "outside."

Thus Mann instinctively figures that she is conscious of the need to allow her children to develop an organic and living self identity, while she exists in a social context which may not provide, and no longer intrinsically generates any positive notion of self in the world. We see in another picture a mother with her real baby and in the background an overturned chair lying at the bottom of the stairs. This is the lost seat of personality and personhood, which as a mother, Mann is so conscious of the need to generate and protect.

In her platinum prints and in the Cibachromes the images are in focus and

Perhaps she is looking towards the next phase of her life, one in which the sensual and maternal identity gives way to the indignities of later life for women in this civilization. Women, it seems, can be shaman too, even though this is usually called witch. There is a shadow of something which looks like a fork with three prongs at her neck, some omen of the threat of time, a threat which having children temporarily suspends. Mann should perhaps be written about by a woman, I can only guess at the *clichéd* associations I hold in this area. But I think my outline is not so far gone.

Some people have found some of the images of her children shocking, and I think that perhaps Mann does, by putting them on display, capitulate to the voracious voyeuristic appetite of the public for sensation. To publicize such personal images as art can only be understood at the metaphoric level. For at the common sense level, they engage in a kind of denial which is the other province of motherhood, which is to reserve to the mother alone the idyllic gaze, and to be unaware of any other. To deny that these images can be viewed in other ways, can even be exploitative, is perhaps reckless disregard for the role of protector, guardian of the innocent. For do we need to see art that thrusts the young into the public gaze,



of the frame at an indeterminate angle. Layering our reading of this seemingly simple picture is the cemetery statuary behind the wall and in shadow, the dark tree trunks thrusting vertically and the mist of the central lighted area in the back. Thus in this one picture we see the interplay of classical sensibility, a kind of antique backdrop onto which is seen an intrusive, yet somehow central image of stark ugly modernity.

In another photograph of two trees in winter over a river, the picture presents a bifocal focus, and figures two things that grow together. The beauty of winter is harsh rather than lush and perhaps reveals more of the underlying structure of the branches as they intertwine, and this is perhaps Mann's instinctual vision.

In yet other pictures, the landscape is blurry, which defies any strictly phenomenological examination. The surface is viewed, but is not important; indeed it is disempowered. There is another realm we are invited into. Combined with the use of an antique camera, with its vignetted image, we are grounded in a timeless and surfaceless domain, one which can be called metaphoric and psychological, as in later figurative work, where

ing on some image of self to guide us.

In a self-portrait Mann is photographed off center wearing a black dress and a string of baubles, while out of focus in the back float porcelain child's heads. Mann's empathic gaze is perhaps best seen here, where she is so conscious of the role of motherhood, while at the same time she is a young woman living in a time in which fundamental and crucial questions of identity are so confusing, and in a time in which identity itself is so often under assault. In the 19th century such art would be considered decadent because it called into question static, fixed roles and touched upon experiences which only marginalized people experienced. Certainly no aristocrat or *haute bourgeoisie*



feature beautiful abstracted iconographic vignettes and small, tightly defined scenes. They are concerned with the variety and depth of beauty to be found in the outward world. But again, the symbolic aspect is undone, so that they are intimate in scale and feeling. In the Polaroids, color and variation of edges and line figure objects in water, with the inherent fluidity and intermingling of forms which may have lost their shape, or are simply not rigid, which are capable perhaps, of emotion, of feeling, of interaction.

In *At Twelve, Immediate Family and Family Color*, we view life at a measured, discreet distance which is at the same time close to the photographer in mind, but also removed in representation. There is balance in these pictures between the inherent intimacy of the subject figures and the dispassionate gaze of the camera. The undiluted life of the subjects is prominent, as in the scene of a woman bearing her pregnant stomach, calling the viewer to an even more profound realization of the fundament of womanhood as Mann finds it being lived.

In the latest self-portrait done in 1994, an older, almost wizened Mann is photographed with a shadow crossing her face.

whether their mother sanctions it or not?

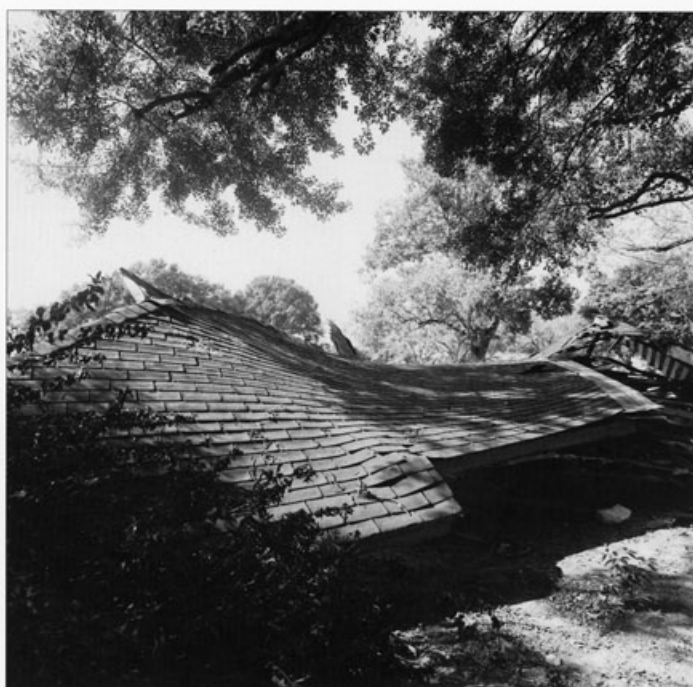
Mann, it appears in hindsight, it seems, validated the use of children in advertising and served another erosion, finally, of the sensibility that tells us that while our society readily and pervasively exploits adults for any purpose which will make money. While advertising assaults dignity as a matter of course, children, up to recent times, have been exempt. Mann may have been the person who crossed the cultural Rubicon for children. Having said that, these photographs require a profundity on the part of the viewer to be appreciated, and they seem to insist on a deeper content, which, as in her other work, defy the exploitation inherent in the representation. In this way, Mann counters the direct but facile presentation often found in photography. Mann somehow dares her viewers to comprehend her psycho-spiritual condition as mother and as woman in the contemporary world.

This is Louis Dobay's first review in five years. Dobay lives in Marfa, Texas.

All photographs are from *Still Time*, the expanded version of an earlier catalogue.



Paul Hester, Main Street, 1978



Paul Hester, Greenway Plaza Expansion, 1979

Telling the Story of Houston

THE ELUSIVE CITY
OCTOBER 16, 1998–JANUARY 23, 1999
RICE DESIGN ALLIANCE, MENIL
COLLECTION, HOUSTON, TEXAS

Peter Brown

Like Atget's work in Paris, Paul Hester's photographs of Houston seem transparent: filled with light, with a formal structure that is revealed rather than imposed, and with a grace both historically grounded and fleeting. Like Atget's they also represent moments in time that have been recognized by a particular sensibility, a sensibility as compelled by its own inner workings as by the reality of the subject matter it confronts. Each photographer also dealt with architectural themes, and clearly both photographers were in love with the medium. But here the comparison can end. Atget had Paris at the turn of one century; Hester has Houston at the turn of another. And if Atget was interested in old Paris and worked for decades to reveal it, such a compulsion on Hester's part would entail no more than a few weeks of travel around Harris County. There is simply not much of the old left.

Houston is a city in perpetual transition, one in constant need of approval—precocious and energetic, always on the prowl for that regionally self-defining world-class status. It is a city which consequently looks with a nervous tic to the outside, more than to its own past, for its sense of visual identity. It is a remarkable gumbo of a place—savory, sloppy, funky and, at times, wonderful. It is a city with little zoning, grand aspirations, distinguished buildings and a Texas-sized sense of entitlement to land and development. Here one finds pleasant neighborhoods with beautiful trees, colorful flowers and drifting clouds, a bright but sterile downtown (about to undergo yet another face-lift); tract mansions and true mansions;

the most carcinogenic air in the nation, the remains of a ward system that still tends to segregate; and manic-depressive sprawl onto the prairies and into what's left of the piney woods. It is a city with oddly situated clumps of towers, strip malls that run for miles, roaring air conditioners and residential developments of so many sorts, sizes and geographically inappropriate names that one feels, at times, as though one inhabits a cartoon. And Hester's photography encompasses an interlocking thought on all this.

He celebrates what remains of the old, through elegiac photographs of buildings downtown and elsewhere; he is in touch with the can-do spirit that produces such structures as the Astrodome and the vast developments to the southwest; he loves the clean lines of many buildings and the vernacular energy of others, and he is outraged by the wholesale elimination of city landmarks and established neighborhoods.

Walker Evans, toward the end of his life, spoke of his attempt to photograph in a style that he termed the lyrical docu-

mentary. It is a phrase that while close to oxymoronic becomes, on reflection, a description of a photography that tries, both objectively and passionately, to define a cultural truth. It is a style that works to winnow plainness out of contemporary complexity, from a point of view that is personal. Hester's work on Houston might be described in this way.

The exhibition of his work at the Menil Collection, *The Elusive City: Photographs of Houston*, was sponsored by the Rice Design Alliance in celebration of its 25th anniversary. The RDA is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of architecture, urban design and the "built environment" in the Houston region. The show, which was conceived by Drexel Turner and curated by the RDA in conjunction with the Menil, included 41 images of Houston taken over a span of 20 years. The photographs were black and white, relatively small (none larger than 11" x 14") and were printed in classic full-toned ways. They were exhibited in a single room, and as one followed the bouncing line of images through this

gallery, one was directed, by the flow of the work, to grouped aspects of the city: contemporary architecture, neighborhoods, downtown, demolitions, freeway strips, odd small buildings and the like. A small but well printed and affordable catalogue of the show has been published, which reproduces the photographs in variant order and includes a perceptive essay by Douglas Milburn.

The primary subject of the show, apart from Houston, is architecture. Hester is a superb architectural photographer, and his work presents both buildings and their contexts in intimate ways. He is also an artist in his own right, and while the show is composed of a mix of work that was done on assignment for *Cite*, the journal of the RDA, or on commission from the Houston Public Library or the National Endowment for the Humanities, many photographs were taken for Hester's own pleasure.

His work shows Houston in multiplicity—and while 41 rigorously chosen photographs are fine, I finished the show wanting more. One hundred and fifty

Paul Hester, Main Street, 1996



Paul Hester, *Escalator Man, 1100 Milam, 1978*Paul Hester, *US Highway 59, 1978*

images might begin to reveal the city in its depth, complexity and contradiction. These 41 function in immediate ways, but also must work symbolically — with one photograph standing in for many. Hester has, I am sure, almost all of those that might be added, in his files. For he, more than any photographer, has kept a vigil with Houston over the years. Given the nanosecond reconfiguration of our town — an ability to know where we have come from, where we are, what we are losing and what we might rebuild is important. The city would benefit from a larger show of his work in the near future.

What we were given, however, I found fascinating. First, apart from revisiting the city photographically, it is a pleasure to watch what Hester can do to make a moment come to life. Though the photographs appear seamless when first experienced, their inner workings emerge as one examines edges, oblique angles, small figures in movement, the configuration of cars and stopped action of one sort or another that many of these seemingly still images contain.

All photographs deal with time, the molten bedrock of the medium, if you will, and it is an element that is particularly important in photographs, such as Hester's, which are made with the historical record in mind.

The initial scene his camera generally engages is that of a static but historically involved environment — the building, or the parking lot or the hydroponic plant stand — the photographed space. A considered surface record is made of this space's present and, if the site is rich enough, of its slow configuration and change over the years. We read the image's surface, looking for clues, recognizing things that may be particular to a defined cultural time, and place: details in signs and lettering, the juxtaposition of architectural eras, prices, the scraped surfaces of development and demolition, the vacancy of certain buildings. One is also simultaneously confronted by the photographic present — the motion of people, of cars, of a smile, the clouds, light and shadow, a young man in a suit striding off an escalator. In Hester's work these

things are carefully placed, or more photographically speaking, these events are anticipated. There is a patience to the work that is admirable. Through both the structure of the photographs, and the small events that cluster around what is apparently, but not necessarily, central, we are tempted to look again — at the image and then, within the context of the show, to the city itself.

Finally, while self-evident, it is clear that we are viewing these photographs in yet another time — in some cases, up to 20 years after Hester snapped the shutter. Given the historical intent of the work, this is an important impression. The content of the work, in a way, will continue to change as time moves on, and our perception of the meaning of the photograph will move with it.

The best photographs, Hester's included, seem given — an instant recognition of variety: layers of time, symbol and shape, and of cultural and personal content. In Hester's case, some of these moments are recognized, and some are constructed or posed out of an inner

vision of what the scene might contain. His line-up of African-American elementary school kids at the back of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, might be an example of the latter. Each child is carefully arranged before the camera, tiny but generating good will beneath live oaks, a neoclassical frieze with the names of the MFA's enshrined artists above them — Titian, Raphael, Velasquez, et al. Another might be a portrait of the old Glatzmaier's Seafood Restaurant downtown, with a menu as information-laden as any documented by Bernice Abbott, a wonderful smile on a woman's face that brightens an already brilliant day. Simply recognized by Hester are three gorgeous, plaintive photographs of individual homes just razed, in a neighborhood designated to become Greenway Plaza. The images are filled with light, grace and movement, smashed homes as beautiful as angels. There is also a remarkable street photograph of people, architecture and Port-A-Cans, a Party on the Plaza, the whole seemingly choreographed, yet grounded by a precise image of the Alley Theater and a photograph of the Houston skyline taken from the top of the University of Houston School of Architecture, with columns everywhere and a hard-hatted worker and small ladder, grace-noting the already light-filled scene; and, finally, two photographs from the edges of freeways — pictures of trash, of a construction sight and of the beginnings of a parking lot with not much on it but tire track, shadow and oddly designed sign poles. Yet each locks into place with the precision of poetic line. And I could go on.

At Hester's best, there is no question. His work is full, graceful and engaging. Collectively, the photographs roll out vignettes that begin to tell the story of contemporary Houston. Hester tells these stories faithfully, with imaginative structure, with pertinent detail and with enough room for the viewer to move easily on his or her own. Hester personalizes, humanizes and makes magical those things that in clumsier hands would be no more than simple fact.

Peter Brown is a Houston-based photographer and writer. His book, *On The Plains*, was published this spring as a DoubleTake Book by W.W. Norton.

Paul Hester, *Party on the Plaza, Jones Hall Plaza, 1996*



Ann Stautberg, 8.23.98, A.M. Texas Coast, 1999. Original in color

Clouds and Atmospherics

ANN STAUTBERG:
TEXAS COAST, 1998–99
JANUARY 23–FEBRUARY 27, 1999
JAMES GALLERY, HOUSTON, TEXAS

Ileana Marcoulesco

This exhibition comprises nine large photographs in all, dated, with mention of the time of day — a.m. or p.m. — of landscapes in or around the Gulf Coast and Galveston Bay.

Each atmospheric region on the globe boasts of the beauty of its clouds, even though clouds come everywhere in limited morphological varieties: cirrus, cumulus, cumulo cirrus, stratus, alto stratus, nimbus and all the combinations thereof: the terminology matters less in Ann Stautberg's rendition than the color: color of the air as it were, due, mostly to a combination of particle suspensions produced by the eolian erosion of soils, the reflection and refraction of light in the water, as well as by locally man-made pollution; this latter, I am told, sometimes enhances the *sui generis* aesthetic outlook of the Texan clouds. Ann Stautberg, by the way, avoided hackneyed tornadic funnels as well as the lightning scenes so essential to Eastern Texas but also overexploited in photography. Certainly the configuration of the land, its flatness, the sparse subtropical vegetation, the proximity of the erratically surging Gulf waters ensures their galloping dynamic.

To try and describe this quality in words is futile. Let us say only that it is of an Atlantic Northern type, with a predominance of cool blues, blueish greens and grays, rather than a tropical, Southern or Mexican one where red or orange dominate. The contrast between this light and the luscious subtropical vegetation in the landscape is even more striking, as in these pre-storm clouds over an ancient pier flanked by a palm writhing in turmoil.

There is a symmetrical, fore-shortened scene of a pier and an asymmetrical bunch of clouds running from top right to bottom left at the menacing speed of a descending storm. She is a master at catching stillness and storminess at once or in succession. Her clouds are refined to the point of abstraction where she does not yield to the temptation of human, animal

or architectural shapes, as if on purpose avoiding this facile effect, but simply makes them an essential component of the landscape's moods.

Magritte's clouds were certainly abstract; yet they connoted invariably lightness, being designed in ethereal, immutable, almost angelic shapes. No natural dynamic involved there, no hint at their real presence in a real landscape; those were symbolic clouds which became emblematic of their genitor; and also of the kind of humoristic paintings Magritte would produce serially for money in his times of financial distress.

For Stautberg, on the contrary, clouds are real, a stabilizing lever in the fragile economy of light between beach and sea.

The closest photographic comparison of manner and mood that comes to mind is the resemblance with the Open Skies series by Canadian Don McCullin. It is also focusing on the tension between rural environment and modern demands; we see in McCullin the same alternance of stripped, barren vast landscapes, and interiors with fruit and vases; McCullin, however, leaves everything in black and white and his still lifes, unlike Stautberg's, are preciously brilliant and lavish on period detail.

The artist herself lives with her painter husband on the bay side of the island of Galveston in a charming gray house surrounded by lacy vegetation overlooking the water crisscrossed with older and

newer wood structures. Daughter of photographers, trained as painter and printmaker, Ann Stautberg starts with very large (as a rule, a meter by a meter and a half) black-and-white gelatin silver prints. Subsequently, she colors them by hand with an emulsion of translucent oils. She does not pursue here a painterly project of dramatization of nature; rather she intends to render the "atmosphere" as she feels it in its full emotional impact. She tries to analyze, as if for herself, the enigma of light in this ecological area — a light that yields a charm so subtle as to escape many a first-time visitor and may remain unremarkable even on second sight. She uses the palest of hues in the landscapes, meant to capture the almost invisible yet indisputably Texan quality of light on and around the Gulf Coast.

Curiously enough, there is no explicit human presence¹ in these landscapes, except the constantly implicit authorial one, and the variable, incidental and eternally variable personality of each viewer. What a lover of the Gulf Coast sees in Stautberg's work, a despoiler of the "poverty," "monotony," "ugliness" and the excessive horizontality of Galveston Island will



Ann Stautberg, 9.6.98, A.M. Texas Coast, 1998. Original in color

never be able to see. Still, some visitors from places afar, whose sensibilities are more openly attuned to the hidden, the discreet and the understated (like a Baudrillard, for example, a Martian of sorts in America) would probably enjoy it to the max.

The subjects of Gulf Coast series are marines in brilliant silver light or shaded by fantastic matte clouds, piers and jetties underscoring the grace and extreme simplicity of ancient

traces of marine woodwork. All are visions of peace and irresistible spirituality, while at the same time rooted in the earthiness of old lumber, relishing in the wild grasses bent by the cutting asperity of the wind. The interplay of symmetric and asymmetric structures, the musical silhouette of the piers, the floating wood surfaces immersed in the afternoon sun; either water or sand in numerous hues of blues, greens or grays forming the back-

ground for the man-made recognizable in the vocabulary of landscapers yet verging on the abstract and the minimal.

I was arrested by the strange beauty of two kitchen still-lives. One presents with a dominant yellow of lemons that immediately brought to mind Flemish Masters like seventeenth century Jan Fyt of Antwerp. The other produced an artfully orchestrated effect from the combination of half a rusty-orange bell-pepper with a broccoli stem, and two onions (one white, one red) in stark contrast with the gray of a stainless steel knife (used to cut the pepper, judging by the seeds on its blade), plus a pewter measuring spoon; all these objects arranged diagonally on a kitchen counter. These colors reminded me of Rubens, even though the subject-matter had neither roundness nor sensuality. Both still-lives were a smaller size (24" x 24" and 39½" x 31") poignant in their uncounterfeited everydayness.

The hand painting in translucent color oils achieved an eerie effect of blush combined with gray half-tones, impossible to achieve with even the most refined of colored film. Sometimes the oil was painted over with a minimal brush, other times smeared with the fingers or the back of the hand, then scratched, smoothed over or simply effaced until only the barest intimation of color would linger. Thus,

you have hues of pink in the sky, and simply yellows for limestone walls while the cypress or cedar wood most of the time remains silver gray as in the initial photograph.

Reality here, by choice of frame and color, takes on the unreal connotation of a dream.

It is a classical example of what *arte povera* can achieve, if this term, applied now to

every other art form including opera, has not already fallen to the rank of *cliché*.

In a tentative and perforce subjective conclusion, I might say that, in her frontal objectual approach, and explicit taste, Ann Stautberg embodies something quintessentially American, whose roots, however, are obviously of North European inheritance. By the directness and authenticity with which the artist relates to her immediate life-world in resonance with the "old values" of humble domesticity and the observance of contemplative stance, her work touched a most sensitive fiber in my being. She revealed to me exactly what I, a relatively recent resident of these parts, most deeply enjoy in the Texas Gulf Coast area, which now I see elevated through her art to a true level of universality.

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FOOTNOTE

1. In other series, Stautberg had let the absence of a human pierce through the image of a shirt hanging out to dry in the wind; closer even, came the scene of flames consuming self-rejected photographs, titled *Art Bonfire*, 1995; an auto-dafé which became a tradition on Galveston Island; every year a number of artists' obsolete works are burned in the open.

Ann Stautberg, 5.24.97, P.M. Texas Coast, 1998. Original in color



Cindy Sherman. *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 19.05 x 24.13 cm

CINDY SHERMAN

The Complete Untitled Film Stills

AUSTIN MUSEUM OF ART-
DOWNTOWN, AUSTIN, TEXAS
NOVEMBER 7, 1998-
JANUARY 22, 1999
ORGANIZED BY THE MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART, NEW YORK

Amanda Shagrin

Almost twenty years after the completion of her *Untitled Film Stills* series (1977-1981), Cindy Sherman's complete body of work was on view for public audiences at the Austin Museum of Art, Downtown (November 7, 1998-January 22, 1999). Seeing the series in its entirety, approximately 70 8" x 10" photographs, impacts the viewer with striking, thought-provoking images. Sherman's ironic tongue-in-cheek photographs are amusing at first glance. Yet, the sheer volume of the series creates the impression that there are more to these images than meets the eye.

After closer look, one realizes that there are stories behind the faces. Stories that draw the viewer into uncovering and making conclusions about the situations and expressions exhibited by the women in the photographs. Sherman creates scenes average enough at first glance but mysterious enough to leave viewers questioning and wanting more.

Evanescence movements such as site-specific Land, Body, Performance and Conceptual Art dominated the art scene during the 1970's, and artists began to document their work through the camera. Through this documentation, the photograph became extremely important for it was the only way to permanently record these "artwork" events. In using the photograph as the medium for her own art, Cindy Sherman creates images that set her apart from her contemporaries. The many layers of Sherman's work are fascinating, yet frightening. Through self-portrait photographic images, Sherman explores and challenges notions of media representation and prototypes and the idea that

the photograph is an indicator not of realism, but constructed idealism.

Beginning as a painter, Sherman soon took up photography. She found that through the camera she could convey her ideas much easier, and more importantly, much faster than by laboriously using a brush and paint. She was never formally trained in photography, yet because of her previous artistic training, formal art and design elements are present in her work. She does not use the medium to raise significant questions regarding the art or tradition of photography itself, like other art photographers such as Sherrie Levine; rather she uses the medium as the tool in which to comment on stereotypes, social issues and practices.

With this series, Sherman broke from convention. The art produced by her contemporaries was, essentially, anti-object art, and the removal of the artist from the physical work itself became a revolutionary accomplishment. Sherman wanted to revive the art object and its corporeal presence, as well as its aesthetic quality. In doing so, she strove to create a novel way of integrating both artist and work, as well as the self and culture. As art historian Craig Owens states, "In Sherman's images, disguise functions as parody; it works to expose the identification of the self with an image as its dispossession."

In 1977, at age 23, Sherman began her first series, which would become known as *Untitled Film Stills*. She had recently arrived in New York City, the Mecca for avant-garde artists. Despite her similarities with other artists, Sherman felt lonely and isolated in a city that thrived on anonymity among the masses. She locked herself in her studio with her trunks of makeup and full-length mirror. With solitude, comfort and security, she began to make art out of her girlhood fondness for playing dress-up. She would don a costume, strike a pose and photograph her invented self. Whatever her inspiration may have been, it worked out, because for the next several years she developed her

work into something that is now considered a milestone in art history today.

Sherman's photographs are not about photography; they are about the images within the square. Her work concentrates on universal situations and languages of the media (advertising, movies and TV), using the camera as a tool and nexus for revealing the reinforcing nature of cultural myths of power and control. In portraying the universal woman as the stereotypes and clichés that the media has associated with women, the characters in the photographs become devoid of identity and self.

The decision to present these images in black and white carries great significance. In doing so, she refers back to and scrutinizes the original film stills done by the studios. These "film stills" allude primarily to the Hollywood B-movie style of the late 1950s and early 1960s and presents a glimpse of the artist in costumes that project diverse prototypical characters (i.e. woman crying in bar, woman in lingerie/scantily dressed, woman in apron, etc.).

In all scenes the gesture or look eludes the direct gaze of the viewer, as though preoccupied in thought or action at some point outside the frame, suggesting a narrative. As a result, her work invokes issues of voyeurism and exhibitionism. Sherman also uses the idea of nostalgia, characteristic of postmodern art, first with the use of the film stills and again in the reminiscent depictions of the constructed images themselves. The artist presents an ambiguity with her characters, illustrative of her work, which oscillates between sex and violence. Moreover, the protagonists' exude a feminine vulnerability, typically associated with the females in the low-budget slasher/gore films, where anxiety is perceived as a mixture of desire, anticipation, anguish and victimization.

The cast of characters in this series is vast but finite, limited to females. The masculine presence is evident, although hardly apparent. Each self-posed image caught on film is entirely masculine, and the printed image satisfies the male viewer. This aspect of her work coincides with her portrayal of images (subtle satirical, allegorical and narrative) depicting vulnerable and domestic women — clichés in which women have been portrayed and confined by the male-dominated mass media (which presents ideal methods of behavior and beauty) and patriarchal conceptions of desire.

The protagonists are devoid of self, where a single snapshot defines their whole essence. They are defined by their clothes, their environment, and most importantly, by their castaway glances and vague, yet defined, expressions. Selfless, soulless, mindless, these women supposedly define who we are as women. Sherman's project is connected to the question of identity — female identity and gender roles originally defined by

males through the media and instilled into the minds of Middle America.

Furthermore, Sherman uses herself as the mirror in which to reflect desires, wishes and fantasies. She achieves this first through the male gaze, then uses that to reflect and contradict women's notions of how they should look, feel and act. Women sometimes wish their lives could be like the lives of the women in the photograph — the dramatic, the tragic, the perverse and the solemnly beautiful. Lives so full of drama, yet so empty and withdrawn. Each created with such precision that they look and seem like an actual snapshot, were it not for its almost too perfect construction. This makes the images feminist — herein lies the distinction between soft-porn and feminist ideology — the fact that you know what you are seeing is not to be taken at face value.

There is a deeper level to the artist's work, which can neither be ignored nor denied. The cynicism, the irony and the sarcasm discreetly whispers from each and every image. Beyond the faces that look away with utter emptiness are faces, females, who are everywoman and no-woman at the same time. They exist, yet are nonexistent. They exist in the mind of the artist, who has become them all, but she is — we are — none of them. We respond not to the individuals she portrays but to the roles themselves, which are readily, easily and unmistakably recognizable. Only by seducing us with straight-laced images, with no blatant irony or kitsch, is Sherman able to captivate and hold her audience. Otherwise, they would just seem like a woman playing dress up, someone wishing they were living other people's lives but her own.

Sherman attempts to mimic with the direct intention to critique. She reproduces imagery and thought from another medium (film) and uses it as a means of social commentary. Essentially, by depicting and emulating particular characters and scenes, Sherman uses each situation to question assumptions and attitudes toward the status of women in the mass media, and, by extension, society. She questions the real versus the constructed, and ultimately, do these images typify women or do we just think they do because they have been repeatedly depicted. Behind the universal female guises seen are not broken souls of capitulation, vulnerability or submission, but souls behind one artist's quiet defiance to expose the stereotype, break the mold and eradicate the fictions of femininity.

Amanda Shagrin is HCP's Program Coordinator.

LIFELONG ASSIGNMENT



Micha Bar-Am, Prime Minister Golda Meir and Chief of Staff Haim Bar-Lev in the air force helicopter, Sinai, 1970

**ISRAEL: A PHOTOBIOGRAPHY
THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS
MICHA BAR-AM
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 1998.**

Dick Doughty

Micha Bar-Am has been a Jerusalem-based news photographer for much of Israel's half century of statehood. As a founding member of New York's International Center of Photography, a member of Magnum Photos and a New York Times bureau photographer for 22 years, he is his nation's best-known photojournalist. Born in Berlin in 1930 to Russian émigré parents, he came with his family to Palestine, then under the British Mandate, at the age of six. He began photographing in his teens ("I needed the camera because I was forgetful," he says). Shortly after Israel's 1948 declaration of statehood, his photos began to be published. Since then, he has been a witness to nearly every significant news event in the country, as well as countless more homey moments that today, in this eloquently edited book, speak deeply about what it has felt like to be part of that history.

Bar-Am's career has covered Israel exclusively, and he calls this his "lifelong assignment." His country has been good to him — it gave him not only a haven at an early age but as a photojournalist it has showered him with an abundance of events that people around the world want to see. It is only in a small way that Israel seems to have also become Bar-Am's burden. In image after image he shows himself to be one of the great photojournalists of the 20th century. Yet, in the world of publishing and photography that does much to shape public perception, he remains identified primarily by his nationality rather than his own name. Unlike many of his American and European peers — Cartier-Bresson, Capa, Smith, Frank, Meiselas — he didn't globetrot, because he didn't have to. As a result, his professional identity remains disproportionately home-grown.

Publishers Simon & Schuster only exacerbate this by publishing this book under the guise of a national birthday card — to their credit a fairly sober one — because it really is a major coffee-table retrospective, perhaps the biggest one that Bar-Am will receive. In bookstores, it will be shelved under "Photography/Israel" rather than "Photographers/Monographs." (I looked for it in one; it is.) Some may

say this is a quibbling point, but I think Bar-Am's work deserves to be on the shelf next to the best of 20th century photojournalism. Bar-Am is a humanist of the first order, a man who has shrewdly and with deep insight gazed upon *homo Sapiens Israelis*. He has done so with a love fierce enough to be both critical and compassionate. He has made pictures whose value will only grow with time.

"I keep my internal eye open for that other, metaphorical image that transcends illustration to achieve a wholeness of its own," he writes in the introduction, "for the elusive entity that is both evidence and evocation, public record and personal vision."

When he spoke on November 1, 1998, in Houston, Bar-Am explained that in selecting the photos, which he did under the guidance of his wife, Orna, the book's photo editor, he "tried to find ways to understand both myself and my country through the images. I do not claim to be an objective observer. But I always try to be sincere and do an honest job." He spoke to a full auditorium at the Jewish Community Center, that hosted Bar-Am's exhibit through December 24. His exhibit first showed at the International Center of Photography in New York.



Valentin Gertsman, Bar-Am at a Booksigning at the Jewish Community Center, 1998

Throughout the book, the photographs bear out Bar-Am's search for both "evidence and evocation." An early photo of a 1957 street demonstration (p. 40) appears to be mostly a compositional study dominated by long shadows and an off-level horizon. Bar-Am calls the photo "my Rodchenko." In such moments, his vocab-

ulary is expressionist. Yet those dominant formal elements communicate, in a manner immediate enough for a news wire, precisely the instability and imminent chaos of the event that was otherwise only implicit at the moment the shutter was released.

Another image of another Jerusalem street demonstration (p. 115), taken 10 years later, relies on a very different, post-modern vocabulary (well before it was fashionable). Aside from the hand that appears to rise to block Bar-Am's shot, the photo lacks a dominant center of interest, and it relies for its effect on layers caused by an accidental double exposure and the resulting relationships among objects in the frame. This approach is antithetical to news photography, the grammar of which overwhelmingly favors the simplicity of the object-itself.

Yet Bar-Am is also no less comfortable, nor less skilled, with such simplicity. His photo from the Tel Aviv zoo (p. 110) visually rhymes a visitor's nose — slightly elongated by the distortion of a wide lens — with a parallel beak of a pelican. Under far different circumstances, in making his wartime images he also relied, out of necessity, on simplicity. For example, in



Micha Bar-Am, Forward position on the Suez Canal, October 7, 1973 (detail)

a blurred image two men seek cover during a firefight in the Golan (p. 36-37). In another, the Israeli soldiers and Egyptian prisoners as one grind their heads into the dirt during an artillery barrage in Sinai (140-141). "You cannot plan such photos. You have to cover your head and pray that you will be spared," he said of the latter image.

Some of the most insightful images in the book are his portraits of Israel's leaders, who are all photographed in private moments that speak to what it may have felt like to be that person at that time. Golda Meir, former prime minister, appears only once in the book, and she is seated in a military helicopter, her head resting on one hand. Although taken in 1970, her tired, most un-prime-minister-like gesture presages the collapse of her government four years later. Also photographed on a helicopter, in postures that mirror each other, are Yitzak Shamir and Shimon Peres, whose political lives later found unexpected commonalities despite their lifelong rivalry. In photographing Moshe Dayan, Bar-Am used Dayan's trademark eyepatch as a design element and left Dayan's one eye central and unforgettable. For David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, Bar-Am chose several photos, one of which shows him seated at a desk in his library — but his fists are raised head-high, clenched.

It is quickly clear that Bar-Am is not out to pass judgment on any of his subjects, all of which inhabited — and whose photos now continue to inhabit — highly politicized terrain. He is neither an iconoclast nor a flack, and the book will garner criticism from both of these ranks. In

news and publishing terms, he is clearly seeking "balance," an exercise not without its own politics, but carried out here, by for example, showing a photo of a Palestinian youth throwing a stone and following it on the next page with one showing an Orthodox Jew in a similar posture throwing a tear gas canister. This is part of what makes Bar-Am's point of view both publishable and widely palatable. In a land where far more partisan points of view abound, Bar-Am has come as close to finding common touchstones as perhaps any Israeli photographer could.

But it is not only from individual photographs that this book achieves its grace. The sequencing and resulting synergies, the pacing and flow of the book-as-a-whole, is brilliantly visually literate, as intricate and artful as music. From page to page, the Bar-Ams — Orna's hand was strong in this regard — eloquently exploit the "third effect" (that which happens to meaning when images are paired and sequenced). They have loaded this book with interconnections, implications, symbols, metaphors and metonyms among events, forms, texts and image placements: "Everything in Israel is about itself and something else," writes

Thomas Friedman in his foreword essay (which is otherwise disappointingly hagiographic). The book has been executed carefully, with these layers of meaning in mind.

Photos of the early years of the country are interspersed with gritty photos from "the Sinai campaign" (an early reminder that Bar-Am writes as an Israeli, for this event is remembered in the West as "the Suez crisis"). These are followed by coming to terms with the Holocaust through memory and the famous Eichmann trial; then came the Six-Day War of 1967; the anti-guerrilla campaigns along the Jordanian border and the military occupation of Palestinians that, as he writes in a later caption, is "dehumanizing to both sides." There then follows a section — the book isn't really divided into chapters — titled *Daily Bread*, where images of ordinary life offer a respite from the adrenaline of conflict. This in turn is followed by its opposite: demagogues, racists, self-declared prophets, protesters and refugees — but this, too, softens after a few pages into a wedding, an (armed) lawn party and the birth of Bar-Am's own son. War follows again, in harrowingly intimate shots from 1973 in the Sinai and one of the most memorable sequences of the book, the quitting of the north Sinai settlement of Yamit in 1982 in fulfillment of the Camp David Accords. The near-civil-war passions that boiled up when the Israeli government forcibly removed settlers from this outpost community is especially haunting today, when the issue of Jewish-only settlements on Arab land are one of the most divisive regional issues. Although the book finishes with Bar-Am's own family portrait with gas masks during the Gulf War and the assassination of Yitzak Rabin, the final photograph — after the index — shows a tiny figure of a girl gazing up at kite-tails curling across a huge summer-blue sky.

It is a book that reads like a life lived richly, to the point of exhaustion. It is a rare volume that has the power to make us look carefully, beyond surfaces, to the flesh and blood of our times.

Houston photojournalist Dick Doughty is co-author of *Gaza: Legacy of Occupation — A Photographer's Journey* (Kumarian Press, 1995).

Family Albums

WHEN WE WERE THREE: THE TRAVEL ALBUMS OF GEORGE PLATT LYNES, MONROE WHEELER, AND GLENWAY WESCOTT, 1925–1935
TEXT BY ANATOLE POHORILENKO AND JAMES CRUMP
ARENA EDITIONS, 1998

Bill Thompson

The history of arts and letters is filled with tales of passionate affairs, fleeting romances and durable marriages that fostered influential creative partnerships, from Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera to Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Among these fervent unions, surely one of the most intriguing was the complicated triangle comprised of George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler and Glenway Wescott, three gay men, each bright and gifted, who first met in 1927 and who would leave lasting marks on the visual and literary arts of this century — Lynes as a celebrated portrait and fashion photographer, Wheeler as a skilled publisher and editor and Wescott as a distinguished author. More than 70 years after the trio began their unique relationship and embarked on individual careers, their private albums are the subject of an elegant, thoughtful book published by Arena Editions.

When We Were Three: The Travel Albums of George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler, and Glenway Wescott, 1925–1935 begins with a substantial essay by Anatole Pohorilenko, an intimate of Wheeler, who offers a thoroughly enjoyable account of the lives of the three men, focusing primarily on their expatriate years, but including a useful overview of their respective upbringings. Pohorilenko's inside perspective lends *When We Were Three* a distinctive familiarity that resonates throughout the book — its very title in fact implies that Lynes, Wheeler and Wescott somehow had a voice in its production, beyond their roles as subjects.

Born in Chicago in 1899, Wheeler was raised in a cultured, middle-class family that nurtured his interests in music, poetry and art. At age 18, he received a gift of a small printing press, from which he began to learn about all aspects of typography, layout and design. Wescott was born in 1901 and raised on his family's hog farm in Wisconsin. At age 16, he enrolled in the University of Chicago where he served as president of the school's Poetry Club. It was at one of the club's meetings in 1919 that Wescott and Wheeler met — the two young men fell in love and embarked on the first of their many travels together. Lynes, the youngest of the three men, was born in 1907 in Englewood, New Jersey. Sent to the Berkshire School as a youth, Lynes lacked the discipline of a serious student, and in 1925, his parents reluctantly sent him on a trip to Paris, hoping it would help him gain admission to Yale. More important for Lynes, however, was the fact that he was able to meet Gertrude Stein and a host of others in her legendary circle, a number of whom would become his close friends. Lynes returned home and started his own small but ambitious press and published several pamphlets, including an essay by Stein. Entering Yale in the fall of 1926, Lynes was immediately unhappy in academia and dropped out after one semester, determined to forge a career of his own, first as a book dealer and, ultimately, as a photographer.



Glenway Wescott, Monroe Wheeler, and George Platt Lynes, c.1939 © Arena Editions, 1998.
From the publication *When We Were Three*

In 1927, Lynes, a flamboyant and impetuous 19 year-old, walked into the Hotel Lafayette in New York to introduce himself to Wescott and Wheeler. By that time, the pair had been together for eight years and had just returned from an extended stay in Europe. The social call was prompted by the suggestion of a mutual friend and veteran of Stein's Paris salon, which both Wescott and Wheeler had also visited. Only Wescott happened to be at the Lafayette to greet Lynes, but the following day he met Wheeler, and the lives of the three would be forever changed. Wheeler, never one to advertise his homosexuality, was immediately attracted to Lynes, a confident, out gay man with a "full, luscious mouth" and "wasp-like waist." Lynes found himself just as drawn to Wheeler, whose chiseled face reminded him of a cast portrait of an Egyptian prince. While physical attraction may have brought these two men together, their mutual love for books and art cemented the bond between them. Lynes and Wheeler began a passionate romance, with an insecure Wescott at first troubled over the relationship but eventually growing to accept it. Over time, Lynes became an integral part of the arrangement between Wheeler and Wescott, and the three men remained together in a complicated *ménage-à-trois* that endured for 16 years until Lynes left it in 1943.

Although none of the three men was wealthy, they always found the means to travel and move among the intellectual and artistic elites of Europe and America. Escaping the malaise of the Great Depression and the constraints of societal expectations, Lynes, Wheeler and Wescott joined countless other expatriate writers, artists and thinkers who gathered in the salons and cafés of Europe or explored the more exotic cities of Africa and Asia. Along the way, the men encountered Jean Cocteau, René Crevel and Thornton Wilder, to name a few. Pohorilenko's text is rich with historical details and gossip about these and other interesting figures, and it adeptly sets the stage for *When We Were Three's* visual component — a

generous selection of beautifully reproduced photographs, drawn from the travel albums kept by Lynes, Wheeler and Wescott.

Personal albums and scrapbooks, which typically circulated among their owners' close friends or family members, have always been the historian's gold mine, preserving ephemeral pictures and texts that offer insight into worlds often difficult to access and easily forgotten.¹ All told, the photographs taken and collected by Lynes, Wheeler and Wescott are a fine testament to their uncommon lives and the diverse personalities they befriended along the way, from the writer Katherine Anne Porter to bodybuilder Tony Sansone. It is clear from the photographs that the trio were rarely less than elegant in demeanor, clothes or company, and the book includes a delightful number of campy, spontaneous photographs of them, as well as rarely seen or unpublished photographs of Stein, Cocteau, Paul Robeson and others they encountered at home or abroad. Among the most interesting are a small handful of Cubist-inspired portraits referred to as "composites," which were created from collaged fragments of photographs.

Most of the images in *When We Were Three* are candid snapshots taken outdoors, often appearing slightly out-of-focus or awkwardly cropped. The reproductions have been printed with great care in four colors, authentically capturing their warm sepia hues, subtle discolored and overall signs of age. One critic for *The New York Times* offered mild criticism for the lack of information accompanying the book's photographs. While the subjects of the images are identified and dated, there are no references to the original photographers, even though several of the prints were no doubt taken by Lynes, who is known to have started to experiment seriously with a camera around 1927. Yet Lynes often did not sign or stamp his prints, and it can be nearly impossible to examine the verso of a photograph if it has been mounted to a page in a scrapbook. Surely the albums'

original audience — Lynes, Wheeler, Wescott, their friends and families — could have guessed who was behind the camera without having to ask. Still, it would have been useful if the book was less vague about the actual albums, particularly their origins, significance to the trio, and provenance. Many such scrapbooks — for example, the extensive volumes produced by the writer Carl Van Vechten and now preserved in Yale's Beinecke Library — are works of art in their own right, worthy of preservation and serious study.

The final pages of *When We Were Three* feature a more scholarly essay by James Crump — a former curator at the Kinsey Institute and the organizer of an important Lynes exhibition in 1993 — on the years following 1935, when the travel albums ended and all three men were busy pursuing their respective careers. Wheeler rose to a position of importance at the Museum of Modern Art, where he not only produced hundreds of catalogues — many of which would set the standard for museum publications for years to come — but also became an important behind-the-scenes operator, courting artists and donors and promoting the museum's activities. Wescott continued to write and publish extensively throughout his life and produced a number of acclaimed works, including *The Pilgrim Hawk*, 1940, and *Apartment in Athens*, 1945. Lynes achieved considerable success in the 1930s and 1940s as a commercial photographer working for the leading fashion magazines of the day and documenting the performances of the New York City Ballet. His work was exhibited at several prestigious venues including the Museum of Modern Art and the galleries of Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse. Lynes's accomplishments, however, were always tempered by a continual stream of personal and financial setbacks, and he never found public acceptance during his lifetime for the work he most valued — his classical male nudes. Although Lynes died from cancer at age 48 in 1955, Wescott and Wheeler remained together for some 68 years — Wescott died in 1987, and Wheeler in 1988. The bibliography that concludes the book is thorough and useful to anyone interested in pursuing further research on the trio.

When We Were Three is a worthy addition to any library and one that Wheeler himself would have admired for its quality design and printing. Pohorilenko and Crump have served up a gloriously illustrated, lucid account of an out-of-the-ordinary relationship, far removed from the banal tabloid dalliances we watch and read about daily. The book stands as a captivating portrait of gay intellectual life between the wars and a moving tribute to three men who led unconventional and rewarding lives.

William R. Thompson is the public affairs officer at the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.

FOOTNOTES

1. One of the best critical studies on the genre of the private album is Anne Higonnet, "Secluded Vision: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Radical History Review* 38 (April 1987): 32. For another perspective on the albums and scrapbooks of gay men, see James Gardiner, *Who's A Pretty Boy Then: One Hundred Fifty Years of Gay Life in Pictures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996).
2. Christopher Benfey, *Bright Young Things*, *The New York Times Book Review*, 21 March 1999, p. 9.
3. See Jonathan Weinberg, *Boy Crazy: Carl Van Vechten's Queer Collection*, *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 7 (Fall 1994): 25–49.



Kimberly Norris Guerrero, Irene Bedard and Valerie Red-Horse in a scene from *Naturally N-A-T-I-V-E*.

Native Issues — Urban Style

Otilia Sánchez

Waiting to make its debut on the American screen, the new Red-Horse Native Productions' film, *Naturally N-A-T-I-V-E*, is the story of three urban American Indian sisters (Vickie, Karen and Tanya Lewis) who embark on a major business venture to sell "naturally native" cosmetic products.

The oldest sister, Vickie Lewis Bighawk, is married to a Lakota named Steve Bighawk. Together they are maintaining a household in urban America consisting of their two children and Vickie's two younger sisters: Karen and Tanya Lewis. As a typical American family, the Bighawks deal with daily living: keeping up with the mortgage on the house, juggling finances, spending time with their children, socializing, remaining close-knit.

As a Native American family, though, they are confronted with dealing with such highly divisive issues as "Indianness" and CDIB (certificate of degree of Indian blood) cards and the use of sports mascots in the schools. Steve, the card-carrying Indian in the film, is supportive of his wife though she and her sisters have been unable to prove their "Indianness" and they don't have a number to tell them who they are. Steve also had his "fight" after his son showed up with a baseball uniform with a "Redskin" on the shirt front; he has to explain to his son why that shirt is demeaning to him as a Native son. Vickie has to deal with her younger sister Tanya's failing to acknowledge her ancestry and not wanting to date Native men.

Vickie and Steve are faced with upholding traditions and values in a society that doesn't understand them. They hold the family together despite the menace of alcohol that Vickie falls prey to but overcomes and the danger of such a modern convenience as e-mail that befalls Tanya when she has a rendezvous with a man she only knows through e-mail. Thus, it is, as Carol Snow Moon Bachofner¹ (Abenaki) has stated, a "film full of family values."

Another Native writer, Steve Russell¹ (Cherokee), has noted that: "Valerie Red-Horse joins Sherman Alexie² in carving out space on the big screen where Indians can be who they really are. The magic to both of these artists is that they turn the literal reality of Indian life into tropes that the mainstream world can understand as literary devices — as, for example, the "rez car" in Alexie's *Smoke Signals* or, on a different level, the girl (Tanya) in *Naturally N-A-T-I-V-E* who does not want to look in the mirror and see an Indian. Or the Indian who becomes convinced that only the BIA doggie license makes an Indian. Whether Indians are ready to have their everyday lives become metaphors remains to be seen, but right now it is like a cool drink of water to see real people on that big screen. Tonto, rest in peace."

Though *Naturally N-A-T-I-V-E* is one that many American Indians can identify with, it may face difficulties on the Hollywood scene. The film may not do well commercially on the big screen if Hollywood buys into it because, as Russell has aptly stated, "... the distribution problem is not so much 'Indian film' as 'women's film.' It is about relationships. No explosions or even gunfire. There is a little violence and a little sex but both are shot in an understated way: no moment of contact in the former and no genitalia in the latter."

Unfortunately, Hollywood films pretty much require the kind of relationship that Russell speaks of.

Another problem with *Naturally N-A-T-I-V-E* is that you don't leave the film with any passages in your mind that you can't let go of — no quotable quotes. The dialog is just okay but not powerful. The film is enjoyable, it addresses relevant issues, it has some good scenes; yet what it's lacking is hard to pinpoint. Perhaps it's just those punch lines that bring points across powerfully.

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

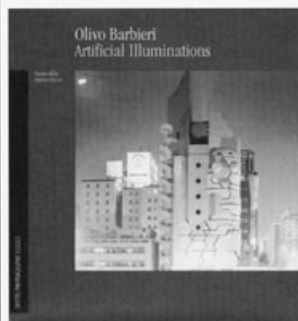
FOOTNOTES

1. Carol Snow Moon Bachofner and Steve Russell are both published Native writers and members of Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. The filmmaker, Valerie Red-Horse, is also a member of Wordcraft Circle.

2. A review of Sherman Alexie's film, *Smoke Signals*, appeared in the Winter 1998 issue of SPOT.

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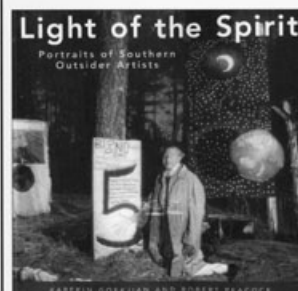
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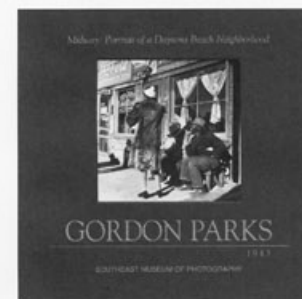
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Compiled by Lucinda Garces



Todd Walker, Self-portrait, 1949

Todd Walker

1917–1998

Ann Simmons-Myers

Todd Walker had two working resumes, a 20-page and a two-page version. The shorter one says at the top, "Just the Important Shit." I shall try to follow the spirit of the latter today.

I was 19 years old, a junior in the department of Photography and Cinema

at the Ohio State University, when I first saw an exhibition of Todd's work at the Silver Image Gallery. I remember walking through the exhibition in amazement and wonder, thinking these are incredibly beautiful — I'd never seen anything like them — but what are they, how are they made? They were, of course, his sabbatiers and early silkscreens. Little did I know that this photographer would become one of the most important people in my life. About five years later, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Vicki Ragan spoke to me about applying to a new graduate program in photography at the University of Arizona. She said the faculty consisted of the first director of Light Gallery, Harold Jones; a non-silver guru, Todd Walker; and another guy, Keith McElroy, who had studied with Beaumont and taught the history of photography. So I applied. When Harold called and offered me an assistantship here, Roger and I had to consult an atlas to find out where Tucson was exactly.

Todd was unlike any teacher I had ever known: casual, gentle, humble, irreverent, gracious and with a dry wit and high standards. He had the answer to everything, a walking encyclopedia. He was

eager to share and to be part of the learning process. But, first you simply had to ask. In my first non-silver class with Todd, he came in with a cardboard box, put the box on the table, and sat down. The students were sitting on folding chairs in a semicircle. "Well, what do you want to know today?" he asked. Dead silence. Everyone looked straight ahead; Todd didn't move. Then people started rolling their eyes from side to side praying that someone next to them would speak. Nothing. Finally, I blurted out, "What's in the box?" Todd just cocked his head to the side, smiled and pulled out chemicals for the cyanotype demo.

He was a consummate artist and teacher, enthusiastic and encouraging. Todd was never one to settle for mediocrity, either in himself or others. He had high expectations, and he even shared your shortcomings with you. He was also incredibly prolific. For many of his students, these formidable characteristics equated one powerful role model.

When you respect and admire someone's talents and skills, you want others to experience those feelings. That was how I saw Todd. One of my greatest pleasures was being able to share Todd with my classes. He would come every semester and entice yet another generation of students into the world of what he called "non-usual" photography. As my students began their own relationships with him, he was always generous with his time and information. To my annoyance, he would frequently indulge my students' queries to him about my time as his graduate student. His stock answer was, "Well, first of all, she never listened to me." And he'd have their rapt attention, and they'd eagerly await the next tidbit from him.

He would always be my mentor, that was understood, although never discussed. As both our lives and needs changed, the lines between teacher and friend began to blur. I always considered Todd to be the big bonus for remaining in Tucson after graduate school.

Todd was the perfect best friend. He already knew where all my skeletons were buried, and he was honest to a fault — OK, he was blunt. He had a wicked sense of humor and a great love of good food, drink and camaraderie. Todd would donate a print to an auction, bake rosemary bread for a picnic in the desert, pretend to eat mud cookies made by my boys in the backyard bakery or stir the gravy at Thanksgiving. But he would not go to a movie with me. "I saw *The Last Picture Show*," he would complain, "and then they made another one."

I never knew how Todd's childlike exuberance would manifest itself. Some years ago he developed a program for the computer that translated text into pig Latin. Shortly after, Peter Bunnell contacted Todd and asked him to write something on the sabbatier process. Todd obliged with an elegant two page description that he promptly translated into pig Latin. He presented me with both versions and asked, "Which one?"

He was always there for me. He never refused a request; he reminded me of my priorities; he toasted the milestones and celebrations; he provided a shoulder for sorrow; and he always made bad puns. I will miss Todd for the rest of my life, but I am grateful to have so much of him for so long. And, yes, his work will continue to bring me joy each day.

Ann Simmons-Myers is a photographer who lives in Tucson, Arizona.

On the Occasion of the Death of Harry Callahan

1912–1999

Chip Simone

I got to know Harry Callahan twice in my life: first as his student, then as his friend. I knew him as a reluctant teacher who was uncertain that photography could really be taught. I knew him as



a passionate photographer, a keeper of silences, a lover of senses and a dreamer of light. The camera owned his soul. At the start of his career, Harry was inspired by the work of Ansel Adams. But unlike Adams, Callahan preferred to explore inner landscape. He transformed the act of seeing into an act of grace and made pictures that were intensely poetic. He was a private man who was possessed by an uncommon passion for exquisite light and for the gift of epiphany that it bestowed.

Words eluded Harry and talking about his work was torture. He felt that pictures came from intuition and that no amount of analysis or philosophy could explain them or make them better. His images, like the man himself, are deceptively simple. Snapshots, silhouettes, double exposures, camera movement, high contrast, the stuff of basic photography. But to him, the basic nature of photography itself, its simple way, its hard edges, eloquent tonality and precise optical clarity, enabled him to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way and to render it with a jeweler's eye.

Harry didn't like teaching, but he was good at it. He taught at the Institute of Design in Chicago (1946–1961) and the Rhode Island School of Design (1961–1977). He struggled shyly with the simplest lessons but somehow managed to convey the deepest meanings. He insisted that his students work hard and find their own way of seeing. That was the most important thing. He demanded nothing less of himself. He photographed every day, walking again and again the same familiar streets hoping to see them in new ways. Working, for him, was an act of faith. His remarkable ethic and dedication to his craft inspired us. His love for photography was profound. Harry didn't just teach basic photography; he taught basic photographer. In his later years reward and recognition caught up with his reputation. The National Gallery of Art mounted a life's retrospective and he received the National Medal in the Arts from the president. He was printing in his darkroom when a stroke brought his productive career to an end in 1996. He hated not being able to do photography. Just weeks before his death, he was working on an exhibition of unpublished work. He is survived by his wife and muse, Eleanor, and their beloved daughter, Barbara Hollinger. Harry's prints are among the most expressive and beautiful of silver objects. They contain nothing less than all the answers to this riddle of a man. In a 1996 interview, Harry was asked to describe his working method. He said "You walk. You take pictures. It piles up." With these eight common words, Harry summed up a quite uncommon life.

Chip Simone studied with Harry Callahan at RISD from 1965 to 1967. He has worked as a photographer in Atlanta, Georgia, since 1972. © 1999

REMEMBERING TODD

(for Melanie)

If I had been sitting in an outdoor café in Tucson, a tourist enjoying the food and the sun and the view of the mountains before the climate became hotter and drier as it would in the coming months, observing people as they passed by imagining their lives guessing at their occupations, I may have mistaken Todd for a rancher.

His tall, lanky body and sweeping arm gestures would have convinced me that he spent his days mending fences with little tufts of cattle hair caught in the barbs, and that momentarily he would climb into his pick-up truck and churn up miles of dust behind him on the road home.

I might have imagined the pictures of cars or nude women pinned to the walls, but more slender, more beautiful like those sent from the auto supply or feed store with a calendar below, like the one my father had above his workbench.

But I would not have imagined the artist who became child-like not man-like when he was talking about his work, pulling boxes from the shelves, to show you the contents of his days.

Or the studio where the smell of lead type and things held together with wire and string were asked to collaborate with computers, and machines designed to do one thing were coaxed into doing so much more.

Where flats of beautiful paper ran twenty-three times through the same press over a blanket that added a new color with each pass to fill some small shadow or tiny highlight so it would look just so.

And I would not have imagined the patience or the love of process or of making, something from practically nothing or the pleasure it brought him.

Or that I would travel to Tucson not as a tourist but as a student to learn about books and rocks and see what it meant to never separate your life from your art.

Ann Fessler

Ann Fessler is a photographer, book and installation artist. Fessler is the head of the Photography Department at Rhode Island School of Design.

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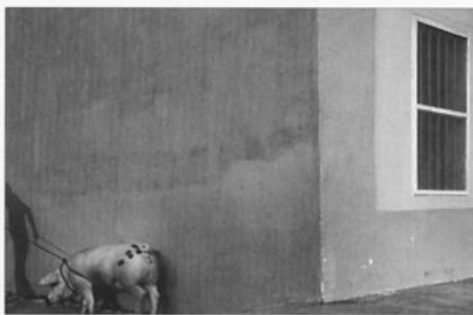
Osamu James Nakagawa
Cover-Up, 1996
Type C print, 8 x 10



Alain Gerard Clement
Untitled, 1985-86
toned gelatin silver print, 5 x 7



Anita Cherniewski
Casablanca Lily, 1987
gelatin silver print, 15 x 10.5



Jeffrey Becom
Pink Pig and Painted Walls, Mexico, 1992
Type C print, 7.5 x 11.5



Robert Bruce Langham
Feeding Crow, 1994
palladium print, 5 x 7



Kristin Capp
Schoolroom, Espanola colony, Washington, 1996
gelatin silver print, 9 x 9

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