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FEATURES

4 Appalachian Legacy
Shelby Lee Adams provided both the text and photographs for his book, Appalachian Legacy. Gregory Spaid writes about the book and his interview with Adams.

12 Brassai: The Reluctant Photographer
Celeste Roberts Lewis describes the magnificent Brassai photographs at the exhibition organized by Anne W. Tucker at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

EXHIBITIONS

7 Mois de la Photo
Now living in France, former HCP staffer Carolyn Richards, reports on The Month of Photography in Paris.

10 A Conversation with Fernando Castro
Johannes Birringer talks at length with photographer Fernando Castro about his work, personal history and philosophies.

15 Sally Mann: Still Time
Louis Doby profiles the work of this enigmatic and controversial artist.

16 Telling the Story of Houston
Peter Brown delves into the meaning behind the photographs in The Elusive City: Photographs of Houston by Paul Hester.

18 Clouds and Atmospherics
An exhibit of Ann Stauberg’s photographs featuring the Gulf Coast of Texas is reviewed by Liana Marcellosco.

19 Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills
Amanda Shaprin writes about the work of Cindy Sherman following the photographer’s show in Austin.

BOOKS

20 Micha Bar-Am’s Lifelong Assignment
Dick Dougherty provides insight into Micha Bar-Am’s exhibition and book, Israel: A Photobiography — The First Fifty Years.

21 Family Albums
Bill Thompson examines When We Were Three, a book written about George Platt Lynes, Monroe Wheeler and Glenway Wescott.

FILM

22 Native Issues — Urban Style
Orilla Sanchez examines the film, Naturally Y-A-T-I-V-E, which focuses on the lives of three modern Native American sisters.

22 Books Received
Compiled by Lucinda Garces

In Memoriam
Cover: Brassai. Parisians at Masked Ball at Pré Catelan, Bois du Bologne, 1946 © Germaine Brassai
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". 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 35 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 near Whitesburg on Johnson's Fork in the community of Hotspot (now called Premium). "I know my world," 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 undeniable power-
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 *Bricé and Crow, for instance*, includes one portrait of Bricé Caudill taken in 1979, 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 work 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.” It is revealing, I think, that Bricé has a large wall of chewing tobacco puffing out his cheek in three of the portraits of him in the book. In another photograph, *Bricé with Prince Albert Cans*, 1980, 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 remacktation 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 Bricé 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, *Bricé and Crow at Trailers 1997*. In this image Bricé 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 “Wally-Mart clothes,” no longer do they wear the overalls they associate 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, *Bricé 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 Randy Sleigh, Ellen Moto 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 barefoot 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 Hooeertive, 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 shoes 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
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 8x10 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 *Hunt’s Corner*, 1993. These “re-photographed” images play a crucial 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 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.

Another example is *Brothers Praying*, 1995, is another example of the autobiographical nature of his work. The powerful intimacy in this image comes not so much from the photographer being at the right place at the right time as it does from another photograph 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 Cubitts walking by his home. Here is what he writes about creating *Brothers Praying*, 1995:

"Before making the photograph Brothers Praying, I talked with Horst 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 Horst 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. Horst 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 disappeared custom. For 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, generally set so that he can be carefully arranged. This artificial light often comes from unexpected angles and serves to emphasize certain parts of the scene. Adams’ lighting style developed out 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”x5” 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 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 Newman Children, 1991, and Burchel 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 *Burchel and Family, 1994*, the boy on the bike, B.R., is lighted most strongly because the photographs is intended to be about his life. B.R. is pictured between his father, Burchel, 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-hard to-reach but still-skilled 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 illusion 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. The past 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:

"It’s tough 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” whose home before his lens. Whose legacy is it that Adams is photographing at *Appalachian Legacy?* The answer is, at least in part, his own.

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

FOOTNOTES


2. Much of the background material for this article comes from a two and a half hour, taped-recorded telephone interview conducted with Shelly Lee Adams by Gregory Spofford on October 6, 1999.


Shelley Lee Adams, *Brothers at Banquet*, 1992

Shelley Lee Adams, *Eats and Drive at Boteler*, 1992

Burchel and family, 1994
E X H I B I T I O N S

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 unimpressive 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 ground-breaking, thought-provoking curations 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. Klodij Sluiban, 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 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 Sluiban’s work.

It is as much an expression of confinement as it is intimacy, especially in view of the time and effort that was invested in the lives of these young people.

The most powerful exhibitions were found, without a doubt, within the Confinement theme. The two exhibitions of the festival were 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 getting permission to photograph interiors, lack of contact with prisoners, editorial control by wardens. One wonders why he bothered at all. The emissions from Perpignan were redeemed, in a visual sense, by Christopher Morris’s photos of Puerto Rico 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?


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 Daniel Nebreda. Perhaps this exhibition was presented in the Confinement theme instead of the Intimacy theme because Nebreda 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 self-consuming 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 photographs by Antoni Clavé at the Catalan cultural center. Even Joel Brut, Communications Director for Mois de la Photo, expressed regret 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 photographs, on a base of photographic paper, with recognizable photographic elements (and some overwrought photographic effects). They have been manipulated to the extent that the photographic chemicals have been masked off in places and swished around a bit, but this is a mannerism to have the profound impact described by exhibition curator Josep Miguel Garcia. He rather overstates his case in describing Clavé’s work as "taller a Dalí, más que a Constructivism" — unwittingly connecting Man Ray’s Champ D’Étoiles with his own "Rayograms."

Other over intellectualized concepts were presented at two commercial galleries. The Galerie Balat and London, which is known for that sort of thing, exhibited photographer Patrick Baillie-Maine-Guard’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 careful exhibitions of solo shows of emerging international artists. Their choice for the festival’s Intimacy theme was particularly surprising.

Reneuil Pelaquier exhibits graphic black-and-white photographs of broken pieces of human skulls. The forms, revealing Japanese ukiyo-e, were monotonous and uninteresting.

Apart from Pelaquier’s work, the Intimacy theme yielded some predictable results. Lovers by Carole Bellache 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 exhibition itself included homages to mussel lovers, Edouard Boubat’s Leila and Bernard Plossu’s François, both at the MEP. The MEP
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 made studies within the Intimacy theme, including exhibitions of work by Yvonne le Marles and Aurore de Sousa. Also, the NTL. Irene Declercq de Peucy-Négri, 1995

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 fired better had it not been dethroned by 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, bunion 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 Diane 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/acquisition consultant Vivianne Fenders, 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 walk 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 Tony Cattan, Larry Fink and Gabrielle Basilico. While not very cohesive, the show made a statement about the quality of work with which she associates herself and her long history of successful exhibitions.

A delightful surprise came with The Intimate Lebanon, Photographs 1960–1975, 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 a Glance, A Photographic

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 wistfulness 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 statements? 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 clause/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 ofsteam. The exhibition, 1967–1991, Soviet Photogra-

photography Mirrors Its Time, at the Pavillon des Arts was described as “a first attempt at a reconstruction 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 had access to the archives that no longer exist or are no longer held by the Communist party line. We have images of fiery oratorical


Leningrad war machinery, proud soldiers and workers, functional well-maintained buildings and assured U.S. presidents shaking hands with Soviet leaders. The quality of the images is substan-

table, understandable since “undesirables” were systematically removed from historical photos. Moscow looked much better in the historical show Old Moscow in Photos at the Museu 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 Graffenried, 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 had made more sense.) Given the lack of images concerning this ongoing conflict, the exhibition offered a rare opportunity for better understanding the political sit-
nation, 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 Wennekes. 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 Johann 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 even focus on 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 contrastive 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 1991–November 1992), 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 drooping 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 gridwork 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, John, 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 mowing images and still photos as metaphor for life and death.
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 one year, the democracy movement in China was crushed by governmental force. As the whole world was watching, we consumed numerous media images that crystallized precisely this dilemma of the (anonymous) individual facing larger, often equally anonymous or irresolvable forces of "rationality" employed in the name and service of state interests.

Citizens of the rational state can claim the protection of civil liberties, 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 courage; it does not simply illustrate the antagonisms between normative rationality and individual freedom, public and private interests, law and freedom. Rather, it probes the philosophical and existential quandary of the opposition between state power and the individual, with its eviscerating acts of legitimation 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.

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 leaper. My training as a photographer is almost exclusively the result of trying to understand and interpret other photographers’ work. I have also learned from print 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 immediate, not to be touched.

When I saw this man’s work who had done all this manipulation in the 1940s, I liberate 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 person being photogaphed, but also do ill service to many Latin American photographers whose work does not pursue exotic imagery. The success of exotic imagery is a phyrnic victory, because the photographer as thinker is disillusioned. 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-dissociation 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 unattainable but as a principle. When you commit to it, you are going to think about matters in certain ways that are truthful and persuasiv e, you will not seek obscurity but try to regard the natural world and the human world with the respect they deserve.

Birringer: What is "reason" 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 Kotok-kotok Series or the Wang Series about the image of a man standing before the tanks during the Tianannmen revolt. They are connected. The theme is the individual whenever he confronts a tyrannical organisation, 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.

Kotok-kotok takes stance against this issue of exoticism I mentioned. The name refers to an archaeological site discovered in Peru some 10 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 civilizations 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 temple itself, but 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 of the very strong sunlight, the other in subdued light. I tried them contrary to expectations: Summer and Winter. Summer is the opposite of the subdued light; 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. If it rains when the sun is in the southern hemisphere, and so they call it Winter and Summer 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 2,700 years after the plaster hands of Kotok-kotok were made: the execution of Josué (Gabriel Condorcanqui) better known as Tupac Amaru. This man was a kind of Gandhi. 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 Peru, and of course, the Incas, were also the ones 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 work. I did not want to 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 but I decided that the Incas built powerful fortresses they built the platforms where they cultivated corn and other foodstuff around the Andes; they did not want food to go to waste. 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 centerpieces of the installation is a circle, the city of Cusco, Qosqo in the Quechua language, which means the center of the Incas. 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 Conquistors there are two lines of interpretation. There is the legend that asserts the Spanish were bringing civilization to the continent and how bad the indigenous living conditions were. All the opposite. Anyway, those hands called La Leyenda Negra continue the series of Kotok-kotok, and another image is called No Conocian La Rueda Ni La Escritura. I think 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 1970 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

Birnberg: Can photography actually make comments on nationalities, 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 using 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.

Birnberg: 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 been there, originally in Germany, but the Berlin wall, like the Wall of China, is a universal icon.

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 dissector that is in the right, sometimes it is also the state that is in the right. I am taking a stance against these dissectors, 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, but I can't help loving again, I can only be very well 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 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.

Birnberg: 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, his 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.

Birnberg: 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 from Houston to China.

Birnberg: And he'd love to model.

Castro: Yes, and he'd love to do that, and he would bring 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 that, it's dangerous." Mind you, I was only trying to photograph him 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 sinned people might think of it as a negative image, because seldom do you think of a tank as a friend. All the time, I was thinking, when I heard that I wanted to have a tank as a symbol of power, of violence, as something that would threaten you, threaten this particular man 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.

Birnberg: What is 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 Wing Series. It is not Wing viewing himself; no, it is the actor viewing whoever that was. They would go to my house and look at the media. Birnberg: It has become hypereolic, although it is authentic.

Castro: It lives in the world of media.

Birnberg: 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.

Birnberg: The model is looking at a fantasy, because the media operate in the US as an entertainment, is that 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.

Birnberg: How have Chinese viewers reacted to your exhibitions?

Castro: A Chinese journalist wrote a review for a Chinese-American newspaper specifically noticed this small work because Quantas of Chairman Mao was the most controversial piece. 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 front of it — 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 am still an atheist and even in some of these ideals. I no longer believe in many of them. I still believe in some.

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E X H I B I T I O N S

BRASSAI: 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 typecast 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 interconnected.

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 (94-109 photos were cut and all 17 books), at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles from April 11 to July 4, 1999, and, in its entirety, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 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 1970s, 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, 50 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 12 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 unabridged version, and an essay by Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Richard Howard, surveying Brassai's work as a writer.

Gyula Halász was born in Brassó, 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 struggled 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: The Reluctant Photographer

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

Serge Hendry, L’Atelier de Brassai, 1965 © Gilberte Brassai

Brassai, Portrait. Maïs, phot. at Pref. Galerie, Berl. de Brussel, 1966 © Gilberte Brassai

• Houston Center for Photography •
of 30, Brassai began to take the photographer 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 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 was part of 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 photographs 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 lesser known series. Examples of Brasso’s drawings and sculpture are recent Nudes. Society knows Brasso’s classical compositions of which the statuette Pariscienne 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 Brasso published as a book in 1946. 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 an interesting segue into the Griffi 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 Brasso’s argument that these griffi were indeed examples of urban sculpture. Similarly, the Arts section shows examples of Brasso’s found sculptures including objects that range from shoes to leaves of bread to giant stone carvings. Often it is what cannot be seen that is most intriguing. An example is the untitled nude from 1920-1932. Fully half the picture is 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 “holy” quality is also found in My Newspaper Vendor 1948 from Paris, Day. The vendor appears to be a kindly old man, but Brasso does not allow his eyes to 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, eye-like faces of the Griffi series.

Brasso’s survey of all man’s activities was not limited to his observations with the camera. It is said that Brasso 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 Brasso observed and heard in Picasso’s presence. The two were good friends from 1932 until Picasso’s death in 1973. Fascinated by Picasso, Brasso must have begun to make notes of their conversations shortly after they met. Thirty years later, Brasso showed Picasso a box labeled Conversations avec Picasso (Conversations with Picasso), and upon Picasso’s insistence Brasso published his notes as a book. Scholars of both Brasso and Picasso will tell you that this book is invaluable and Picasso himself said, “If you want to understand me, read Brasso’s book.”

Brasso 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 Brasso that complements the images and illuminate his subjects. These books include: Seville en Vite (Fiesta in Seville), Griffi, Le Paris Secret des Années 30 and Les Artistes de Ma Vie (The Artists of My Life), the last book Brasso published before his death in 1984. Recently, however, another Brasso book appeared, Marcel Proust: Son Empreinte de la Photographie (Marcel Proust: Under the Influence of Photography), which perhaps Brasso’s widow, Gilberte, is hoarding other surprises.

During World War II when it was difficult to get supplies, Brasso 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, Tout Qu’il Faut, a 12-minute short with an original score by Louis Bessiere. The stars of his film are the animals of the Vincennes Zoo, but he makes no commentary, nor does he subject them to Disney-fication. Rather, like all his subjects, he allows the animals to be, adding only form and poetry to what is already innate in their characters. Tucker suggests that Brasso 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 Brasso 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 Brasso, Vicki Goldberg reveals a story of a party where Jacques Lang, the French Minister of Culture, comments, “Brasso is a great photographer.” And Francois Mitterrand replies, “He is, above all, a very fine writer.”

Romanian historian Andor Horvath has pointed out that Brasso “did not become an artist as a photographer, but chose photography as an artist.” Tucker 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. Brasso does not fit easily into the history of photography in part because he never considered himself a photographer.

Early on, Brasso 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, but he immortalized his pseudonym with his photographs. Photography may have turned out to be what Brasso 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.
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 mixture of postmodern 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 in 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 of the frame at an indeterminate angle. Layering our reading of this seemingly simple picture is the ceremony statutory 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 surfacesless domain, one which can be called metaphoric and psycho- logical, as in later figurative work, where Mann's interest in the structure of identity becomes fully realized in images of her children. It is in this way archaological 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 such nakedness. In those photographs the children are posed so as to represent issues of identity and intentionality and self-conception. They almost defy our conventional perspectival 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 possibly also be self-identity; these roles would be pre-determined and static, unchanging and unmovable.

In this portrait we perhaps recall the mythic Jackie Kennedy facing the role of mother after the events of 1963. The use of stone 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, nor does it, indeed intrinsically generate any positive notion of self in the world. We see in another picture a mother with her real baby and in the background an over turned 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 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 a double, so that they are intimate in scale and feeling. In the Polaroids, color and variation of edges and line figures 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 emotions, of feeling, of interaction. At Twelve, Honey, , which we refer to as 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 undulated 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 wistful Mann is photographed with a shadow crossing her face, perhaps her 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 and context which cannot be understood, 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 contemplates the direct but facile presentation often found in photography. Mann somehow dates her viewers to comprehend her psychospiritual condition as mother and as woman in the contemporary world.

This is Louis Dobay's first review in five years. Dobay lives in Marble, Texas.
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 ground 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 compassion 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 eye to the outside, more than to its own past, for its sense of visual identity. It is a remarkable gambit 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 spread 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 document.

dary. It is a phrase that while close to somnolent 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 platitude 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 43 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 Cité, 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 as rigorously chosen photographs are fine, I finished the show wanting more. One hundred and fifty
images might begin to reveal the city in its depth, complexity and contradiction. These as 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 era, 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 photographs 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 a good will beneath live oak leaves, a neoclassical frieze with the names of the MFAs' enshrined artists above them — Titian, Raphael, Velasquez, et al. Another might be a portrait of the old Glattzmair's Seafood Restaurant downtown, with a menu as information-laden as any documented by Berenice Abbott, a wonderful smile on a woman's face that brightens an already brilliant day. Simply recognized by Hester are three gorgeous, primitive 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 lights 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 charming hands would be no more than simple fact.

Peter Brown is a Houston-based photographer and writer. His book, On the Plane, was published this spring as a Dust Jackets Book by W.W. Norton.
This exhibition comprises nine large photographs in all, dated, with mention of the time of day: a.m. or p.m.—of landscapes or around the Gulf Coast and Galveston Bay.

Each atmospheric region on the globe boasts of the beauty of its clouds, even though clouds constitute only a limited morphological varieties: cirrus, cumulus, cumulonimbus. All the combinations thereof: the terminology matters less in Ann Staubberg's rendition than the color: color of the air as it were, due, mostly to a combination of particle suspensions produced by the saltwater evaporation of the Texas coast. Ann Staubberg, by the way, avoided backcountry ranches and instead of the sheen on the Atlantic coast of Texas but also overexploited in photographs. Certainly the configuration of the land, its flatness, the sparse subtropical vegetation, the proximity of the cactus forest that surrounds the Gulf waters ensures their galloping dynamics.

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 blue, cooler blues, greys, rather than a tropical. Of Southern or Mexican one which 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 swathed by a palm waving in turmoil.

There is a symmetrical, foreshortened scene of a pier and an asymmetrical branch 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 motion 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 inevitably lightness, being designed in ethereal, immaterial, 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 genius; and also of the kind of humorous painting Magritte would produce strictly for money in times of financial distress.

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

The closest photographic composition of manner and mood that comes to mind is the resemblance to 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 alteration of stripped, bare forest landscapes, and interiors with fruit and vines; McCullin, however, leaves everything in black and white and his still lifes, unlike Staubberg's, are precisely brilliant and lavish in detail.

The artist herself lives with her painter husband on the bar side of the island of Galveston in a charming gray house surrounded by lacy vegetation overlooking the water crossed over with older and newer wood structures. Daughter of photographers, trained as painter and printmaker, Ann Staubberg 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 emulation 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 palette of hues of the landscapes, meant to capture the almost invisible yet indisputably Texas quality of light on and around the Gulf Coast.

Curiously enough, there is no explicit human presence in these landscapes; except the constantly implicit authorial one, and the variable, incidental and eternal and variable personality of each viewer. What a lover of the Gulf Coast sees in Staubberg's work, a despiser of the "power of monotony," "ugliness" and the excessive horizontality of Galveston island will never be able to see. Still, some visitors from places afar, whose sensibilities are more openly attuned to the hidden, the discreet and the underscaped (like a Rand-illard, for example, a Maritan of sorts in America) would probably enjoy it to the max.

The subjects of Gulf Coast series are marines in brilliant 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 spiritualility, while at the same time rooted in the earthiness of old lumber, relishing in the wild grasses bent by the cutting superlative of the wind. The interplay of symmetric and asymmetric structures; the musical silhouette of the piers, the floating wood surfaces immersed in the afterglow of sun; either water or sand in numerous hues of blues, greens or grays forming the background for the man-made recognizable in the vocabulary of landscapes yet verging on the abstract and the minimal.

I was arrested by the strange beauty of two kitchen still-lifes. 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 rainy-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 35" x 35") preposterous in their unexpected everydayness.

The hand painting in translucent color oils achieved an eerie effect of brush 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 scattered with the fingers erasing back of the hand, then scratched, smeared over or simply effaced until almost the last trace of color would vanish. 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 in the initial photograph.

Reality here, by choice of frame and color, takes on the unreal connotations of a dream. It is a classical example of what arte povera can achieve, if this term, applied now to every other art form into which it has not already fallen to the rank of cliché.

In a tentative and perceptive subjective conclusion, I might say that, in her frontal oblique approach, and explicit taste, Ann Staubberg 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 humanism and domesticity and the observance of contemplative stance, her work touched a most sensitive fiber in my being. 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.
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 (1977–1980), Cindy Sherman's complete body of work was on view for public audiences at the Austin Museum of Art. Sherman's complete body of work was on view for public audiences at the Austin Museum of Art. Seeing the series in its entirety, approximately 70 8 × 10 photographs, impacts the viewer with striking, thought-provoking images. Sherman's ironic tongue-in-check 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.

Existent 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 becomes 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 photographs 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 forever 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 identity 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 looked herself in her studio with her trunk of makeup and full-length mirror. With solitude, comfort and security, she began to make art out of her ghoulhood 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 photographs; they are about the images within the square. Her work concentrates on universal situations and language 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 cliches 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 principally to the Hollywood B movie style of the little acting and early 1940s and 1950s and presents a glimpse of the artist in costumes that project diverse prototypes of characters (i.e. woman crying in bed, woman in lingerie/semi-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, characteristc 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 film genre. The image 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-portrayed 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 vulnerability and domestic violence cliches 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 frames their whole essence. They are defined by their clothes, their environment, and most importantly, by their customary glasses and vogue, 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 pervers 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 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 straightforward images, with no blatant irony or kitsch, is Sherman able to captivate and hold our 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 role 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 guise assumes are not broken souls of capitalization, 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 HDFP Program Coordinator.

19
LIFELONG ASSIGNMENT

Micha Bar-Am, Prime Minister Golda Meir and Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan in the air force's helicopter, Sinai, 1970.

ISRAEL: A PHOTOGRAPHY
THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS
MICHCA BAR-AM

Dick Dougherty

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 in his nation's best-known photojournalist. Bar-Am's emigre 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 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 by his own name. Unlike many of his American and European peers — Carrier-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. It is really 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/Magororaphers." (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 Errolt. 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 person 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, in a blurred image two men seek cover during a firefight in the Golon (p. 30-31). In another, the Israeli soldiers and Egyptian prisoners as one grinds their heads into the dirt in an artillery barrage in Sinai (p. 140). "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 presence that mirror each other, are Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres, whose political lives later featured unexpected valleys 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 visible 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, which his lists are raised high, clenched. It is quickly clear that Bar-Am is not out to pass judgment on any of his subjects, all of which inhibited — and where 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, it is clearly seeking "balance," in exercise not without its own politics, but carried by, for example, showing a photo of a Palestinian youth throwing a stone and following it on the next page with a shot of an Israeli soldier 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 few positions can be more popular than the images of a global photographer that this book achieves its grace. The sequencing and resulting synopses, as if the book were a book, 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 a cache of images that have the power to be seen as symbols, metaphors and metonymies among events, forms, texts and image placements. "Everything in Israel is about something and something else," writes Thomas Friedman in his foreword essay (which is otherwise disappointingly photographic). 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 Israel as "the Sinai war." 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 Palestinian lands that, as he writes in a later caption, is "dehumanizing to both sides." Then follows a section — the book isn't really divided into chapters — titled Daily Brief, where images of ordinary life in a留学生 from abroad. In contrast, this is followed by following its opposite demographics, racist, self-prophets, protesters, signers — 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 intense shots from 1973 in the Sinai and one of the most memorable sequences of the book, the quelling of the northern Israeli settlement of Yemeni in wake of fulfillment of the Camp David Accords. The near-civil war passions that boiled up when the Israeli government forcibly removed settlers from this northern 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 Yitzhak Rabin, the last photograph, it is after the index — shows a tiny figure of a girl gazping up at kite-tails curling across a huge summer-blue sky. All in all, a photo book that reads like a life lived richly, to the point of exhaustion. It is a rare volume that the power to make us look carefully, beyond surfaces, to the flesh and blood of our times.

photojournalist Dick Doughtry is co-author of Jews Legacy of Occupation — A Photojourney (Turner Press, 1995).
Family Albums

WHEN WE WERE THREE: THE TRAVEL ALBUMS OF GEORGE PLATT LYNES, MONROE WHEELOCK, AND GLENWAY WESCOTT, 1925–1935
TEXT BY ANNA PÖHÖRLENIKO and JAMES CRUMP
ARENA EDITIONS, 1998

Bill Thompson

The history of art and letters is filled with tales of passionate affairs, fleeting romances, and long-drawn out, often 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 complicating 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 Pohorleniko, an intimate of Wheeler, who offers a vivid and thoroughly enjoyable account of the lives of the three men, focusing primarily on their expatriate years, but including a useful overview of their respective upbringing, Pohorleniko’s inside perspective lends What 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 as a child in a typical middle-class family that nurtured his interests in music, poetry and art. At age 16, he received as a gift a small black and white photo from which he began to learn about all sorts of typographic, layout and design. Wescott was born in 1901 and raised on his family’s hog farm in Wisconsin. At age 18, he entered 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 1892 in Englewood, New Jersey. Sent to the Berkshire School as a youth, Lynes lacked the discipline of a serious student, and in 1909, 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 that it provided him with the opportunity to meet and become a close friend of the famous photographer, Steichen. Lynes returned home and started his own small but ambitious press and published several pamphlets, including an essay by Steichen. Entering Yale in the fall of 1925, Lynes was immediately unorthodox and his nonconformity is evident even after one semester, determined to forge a career of his own, first as a book dealer and, ultimately, as a photographer.

In 1927, Lynes, a flamboyant and impetuous 19-year-old, walked into the Hotel Lafayette in New York to introduce himself to Wheeler and Wescott. By that time, the pair had been together for eight years and had just returned from an extended trip to 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 three of them would be forever changed. Wheeler, never one to advertise his homosexuality, was immediately attracted to Lynes, a confident, out gay man with a “full, husky” voice and “swag-like” stance. 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 inseparable Wescott immediately attracted to Lynes too. They all became good friends and would travel together, spending long hours discussing books and art, and eventually becoming known as the “Renaissance Men” of the period.

Personal albums and scrapbooks, which typically circulated among their circle of close friends and family, Wescott had always been the historian’s gold mine, preserving ephemeral pictures and texts that offer insights into worlds often difficult to access and rarely forgotten. 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 Sanzone. 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 amusing campy, spontaneous photographs of them, as well as rarely seen or unpublished photographs of Stein, Coots, 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 “composés,” 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 indistinctly cropped. The reproductions have been printed with great care in four colors, authentically capturing their warm sepia hues, subtle discolorations 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 not doubt taken by Lynes, who is known to have started to experiment seriously with a camera around 1925. 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 in terms of size, pages, and provenance. Many such scrapbooks — for example, the extensive volumes produced by the writer Carl Van Vechten and now preserved in the Beinecke Library — are works of art in their own right, worthy of preservation and serious study.

The opening 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 back in 1991 — 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 standards for museum publications for years to come — but also became an important behind-the-scenes operator, courting artists and art world personalities to support the museum’s activities. Wescott continued to write and publish extensively throughout his life and produced a number of acclaimed books, including The Haunting of Hounds Ham, Airs of 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. He was also invited to several prestigious venues including the Museum of Modern Art and the galleries of Julien Levy and Pierre Matisse. Lynes’s accomplishments, however, were often 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 47 in 1955, Wescott and Wheeler remained together for some 48 years and died in 1983 and 1985 respectively. The bibliography that concludes the book is thorough and useful to anyone interested in pursuing further research into the trio.

When We Were Three is a worthy addition to any library and one that Wheeler himself referred to for its quality design and printing. Pohorleniko and Crump have served up a gloriously illustrated, lucid account of one of the ordinary relationships 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 of the camaraderie and support between 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


21
Native Issues — Urban Style

Otilia Sánchez

Writing 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 siblings: 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 CEBH (Certificate of Degree of Indian blood) cards and the use of sports mascots in the schools. Steve, the card-carrying Indian in the family, is supportive of his wife though she and her sisters have been unable to prove their “Indianness” and 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. Steve feels that his son 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 baffles Tanya when she has a rendezvous with a man she only knows through e-mail. Thus it is, as Carol Snow Moon Bachofner’ (Abenaki) has stated, “a film full of family values.”

Another Native writer, Steve Russell’ (Cherokee), has noted that “Valerie Red Horse joins Sherman Alexie” 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 “red ear” 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 messages in your mind that you can’t get on by — no quotable quotes. The dialogue 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 that punch lines that bring points across powerfully.

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

FOOTNOTES
1. Carol Snow Moon Bachofner and Steve Russell are both published Native writers and members of Woodcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. The filmmaker, Valerie Red Horse, is also a member of Woodcraft Circle.
2. A version on Sherman Alexie’s film, Smoke Signals, appeared in the Winter 1998 issue of SPOC.

Books Received


Museum of Contemporary Photography.


Compiled by Lucinda Garcia

• Houston Center for Photography •
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 a photography student in his class and 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 things - the fruits of his own perception and the view into an 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 unsurpassable 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 work, 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 tonalities and precise optical clarity, enabled him to see the ordinary in an extraordinary way and to render it with a jeweler's eye. He didn't like teaching, but he was good at it. He taught at the Institute of Design in Chicago (1946-1966) and the Rhode Island School of Design (1966-1977). 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 everyday, 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 held a retrospective and he received the National Medal in the Arts from the president. He was printing in his darkness 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 was 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 the answers to this riddle of a man. In a 1996 interview, Harry was asked to describe his working life and said: "You walk. You take pictures. It piles up." With these few common words, Harry summed up a quite uncommon life.

Chip Simone studied with Harry Callahan at RISD from 1956 to 1957. He has worked as a photographer in Atlanta, Georgia, since 1973. © 1999

• Houston Center for Photography •

REMEMBERING T:D (for Melinda)

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 stores 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.

Todd Walker
1917-1998
Ann Simmons-Myers

Todd Walker had two working resumes, a 26-page and a two-page version. The show a coin says at the top, "Just the Important Thint?" 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 with wonder, thinking: are these incredibly beautiful — I'd never seen anything like them — but what are they, how are they made? They were, of course, his sabbaticals 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 guru, Keith McEfoys, 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 as good a student as his teacher, I had ever known, casual, gentle, humble, irreligious, 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 on the table, and sat down. The students were sitting on folding chairs in a semicircle. "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 even a little medious, 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 is 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 I understood, although never discussed. As our own lives and needs changed, the lines between teacher and friend began to blur, I always considered Todd to be the big boss 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. He could be a wise and, at times, kind. Of course, 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 rude 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 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 sabbatical 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. I never received a request; he reminded me of my priorities; he toasted the milestones and celebrations; he provided a shoulder for sorrows 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.
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