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Cover: Sally Gall, Stop, 1999. Gelatin silver print
Between Two Worlds

PHOTOGRAPHY AT THE EL PASO MUSEUM OF ART

WILLIAM THOMPSON

Among the highlights of the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2009 Biennial Exhibition was Que linda la brisa (How Lovely the Breeze), an edgy series of photographs by James Drake. Drake was a former resident of El Paso and is known for his intuitive explorations of life along the US/Mexico border. Drake's photographs, candid portraits of transients in a shabby bar in Juárez, Mexico, brought a rare glimpse of border life to the Whitney's pristine walls and vividly illustrated how the region has served as rich territory for adventurous photographers.

Borders define life in El Paso. Situated on the boundary of Texas, New Mexico and Mexico, the city has grown from a small, dusty settlement nestled between the Rio Grande and the rugged Franklin Mountains to a sprawling, bilingual metropolis, severely taxing the fragile resources of the surrounding Chihuahuan Desert. Today, the city is home to a predominately Latino population of more than 700,000 people. Across the Rio Grande, the population of El Paso's sister city, Juárez, has swelled to nearly two million residents, many of whom work in local maquiladoras, vast foreign-owned manufacturing plants, and live in the impoverished colonias that have developed along the outskirts of the city.

Within this setting of striking beauty and stark contrasts, the El Paso Museum of Art has grown into a major cultural resource for the surrounding region. Once housed in the historic Turney Home, the museum moved in 1996 into a state-of-the-art, 100,000-square-foot facility designed by BKM Architects on the site of the former Greyhound bus station in downtown El Paso. Best known for its strong holdings of Renaissance and Baroque painting, Colonial Mexican art and 19th and 20th century American art, the museum's collection features more than 5,000 objects including a sizable gathering of works on paper.

Currently some 300 photographs, spanning the mid-19th century to the present, are in the museum's permanent collection. The earliest of these images include a small, unseen gathering of daguerreotypes and tintypes and several historic albums relating to the history of El Paso/Juárez. The collection takes on more character, however, in the early 20th century, with several fine portraits of affluent El Pasoans taken by Fred J. Feldman, a local studio photographer, and scenic views of Mexico by the accomplished German photographer Hugo Brehme. The largest body of work by a single photographer in the museum's collection is that of Manuel Carrillo, who donated more than 200 of his exhibition prints in 1999. Born in 1906 in Mexico City, Carrillo took up photography at age 49 and devoted himself to documenting the landscape and people of rural Mexico. Inspired by films and the work of Modernist photographers such as Edward Steichen, Paul Strand and Edward Weston, Carrillo achieved widespread recognition for his sensitive interpretations of his native country. El Paso remains the most important repository for Carrillo's work — more than 10,000 of his prints, negatives and archival materials are housed in the library of The University of Texas at El Paso.

Since the early 1990s, the museum has made it a priority to exhibit and collect contemporary art including photography from the southwestern United States and Mexico. In the process it has acquired more than 200 works by contemporary photographers who have worked in Texas,
New Mexico and Mexico particularly along the border. The majority of the artists have exhibited at the Museum during the past decade, many in the 1994 group exhibition that was in El Paso; curated by photographer Richard Barson, the installation featured a wide range of work from more than 30 photographers, all of whom took pictures in El Paso at some point in their careers. While a number of the artists, including Max Aguilera-Hellweg, Bruce Bernard and James Drake, were longtime residents of El Paso, others, such as Richard Avedon, Peter Goin and Hiroshi Hamaya, spent much shorter periods of time in and around the city. Despite their divergent backgrounds and approaches to the camera, all of these photographers shared at least one thing in common — a powerful response to the unique environment of the border, particularly its people, landscape and architecture.

Virgil Hancock, Maurice Heller, Victor LaViolette and Willie Varela. Hancock's vibrant Cibachrome prints, which depict the crowded, industrial towns and cities of Chihuahua, Mexico were featured in the museum's 1996 exhibition Coated Wells.

While the museum's fledgling photography holdings are modest in comparison to those of larger institutions, they are not without depth. In 1997, the museum acquired a collection of 70 prints by John Ward, a Harvard-trained physicist turned photographer who now resides in Estes Park, Colorado. Donated by James Holme, the CEO of El Paso Electric Company and a friend of the artist, these prints span the late 1960s through the 1980s and chart contemporary landscape interests in order to capture subtle nuances of the photography collection's greatest strength, one of its most striking weaknesses is the lack of representation by women. In 1994, photographer and film scholar Cynthia Farah became one of the first women to be included among the museum's photography holdings when she donated a portrait of El Paso artist Tom Lea. A native of El Paso, Farah serves as assistant professor of film theory and criticism at The University of Texas at El Paso and has published several books of her photographs including the highly acclaimed Literature and Landscape: Writers of the Southwest, released in 1976 by Texas Western Press. The museum is working to remedy the gender gap in its photography collection, and recent gifts have brought in a hand-bound book by San Antonio-based artist Kathy Vargas, known for her innovative reinterpretations of traditional Mexican imagery, as well as works by several El Paso exhibitions and the Peter and Margaret de Nettler Gallery, devoted to works on paper. Gateway Gallery, a multi-use space adjacent to the Museum's Grand Lobby, is also used primarily for the display of prints, drawings and photographs. Recent exhibitions have included The Pictures of Texas Monthly: Twenty-Five Years; Midway: Portrait of a Deserted Beach Neighborhood; Photographs by Gordon Parks; The Forest Through the Trees: Photographs by John Ward; Nieciosnac Real Pictures 1975-1999; Ann Stauffer: Texas Country; and Peter Goin's Homemakers. Upcoming exhibitions in 2000-2001 will feature the work of Gay Block, Edward S. Curtis and Amel Adams.


The University of Texas at El Paso and the Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives have collaborated on an online exhibition of Camilo's work at: http://olinas.usu.edu/Virtual-gallery/
Against the Grain

MALCOLM S. BRODIEWICK

"There is a tension at the heart of Robert Mapplethorpe's art, verging on paradox, between its most distinctive content and its mode of presentation," so begins Arthur Danto's essay, Playing with the Edge. The issues revolve around the homoerotic photographs that Mapplethorpe took in the 1970s and 1980s.

THE FOUR POLER

Four polar functions seem to cover all of nude photography: the pornographic, the erotic, the didactic and the artistic. I call these poles because any given image can be composed of combinations of these functions in varying degrees.

The photographic image is related to its function to arouse our sexual hunger. The explicitness focuses our attention to these very details that constitute the depicted activity. The more explicit, the less room there is for alternative interpretations, the more limited is the range permitted to the imagination. In fact, in the extreme, this explicitness ties the image securely to the present.

The erotic image also excites our sexual fantasy. The modus operandi of such images is the suggestion. The erotic image breaks the bounds of the present by implying a pre-image history and a post-image consequent. In other words, the erotic is anecdotal. To achieve this storytelling mode, the image cannot be so explicit that it engages our physiology directly, as does the pornographic image. Moreover to signal the anecdote, the cultural cues are much subtler than for the "pornographic."

The goal of a third pole of nude imagery is to inform. Photographs quite obviously have informational content. Scientific renditions of the nude are meant to point out anatomic relations. In such cases the body is objectified and depersonalized. The nude, or the relatively nude image, in a cultural content, has long been a tool of the anthropologist.

Let us now consider the artistic nude as the fourth pole. I suggest that the artistic rendition of Eros is abstract and intellectual, which is not to say joyless. For the formal devices of the artistic, the abstracted nude can be beautiful as rhythm, textures, light and shade, compositional placement and complexity and the rest of the classical formalist armamentarium. And in the complex interaction of these artistic values, the erotic and the didactic (or even pornographic content) deepens, becomes thoughtful, becomes more than anecdotal, becomes philosophical, even political. The artistic nude accomplishes this transformation of Eros by emphasizing the graphic qualities of the image over their content. Many are the pornographic functions, such as Barbara Morgan's Martha Graham. Consider Mapplethorpe's Ajitto (1980) which seems a direct recreation of Jean Hippolyte Flandrin's Jeune homme nu assis au bord de la mer (1834-36). In many other nude images one feels an affinity for Myron's Discobolus, e.g. 420 BC, or the Aphrodite of Kyrene. Indeed some of Mapplethorpe's last images are of statuaries rendered in rather stark, and to my taste emotionally cold (not meant as a value judgment) rendering. The great majority of images lacks any background and contains subjects of simple, but arresting composition. One feature characteristic of the artistic nature of these images, not evident from published reproductions, is their large size and their "artistic" framing. Indeed toward the end of his brief life, Mapplethorpe succeeded in creating large-scale platinum prints on canvas that were actually used with paintings. I am still a snob a little bit about painting versus photography, observes Mapplethorpe, "so that it is a compliment when they call it a painting and I know it is in fact a photograph. To make pictures big is to make them more powerful."

MEANING AND CONFUSION IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

The images from top left Robert Mapplethorpe, Kim Moody, 1983 Robert Mapplethorpe, Self Portrait, 1982 Robert Mapplethorpe, Self Portrait, 1886 and their "artistic" framing. Indeed toward the end of his brief life, Mapplethorpe succeeded in creating large-scale platinum prints on canvas that were actually used with paintings. I am still a snob a little bit about painting versus photography, observes Mapplethorpe, "so that it is a compliment when they call it a painting and I know it is in fact a photograph. To make pictures big is to make them more powerful."

MEANING AND CONFUSION IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE

AT THE IMAGE LEVEL

Of course it is impossible to simply generalize a set of observations over the entire output of Mapplethorpe's photography. Let us define three bodies of work: the flower images, the portraits and the homoerotic images.

Many of the homoerotic images, especially those depicting sadomasochistic (S/M) activities, are frankly pornographic. The images tend to be surprisingly cold considering the subject matter. Mapplethorpe articulates the coolness, amorality and detachment of Warhol's circle. The images are more of a reflection of pornography as the subject matter for the didactic pole than they are the titillation of the pornographic pole as defined above.

These photographs are collaborations between Mapplethorpe and his friends. The subjects know they are being photographed. The activities portrayed represent values important to them. They are posing in imitation of themselves. They are not anonymous but are named in the photograph's title. With permission. Perhaps with pride. Mapplethorpe has been criticized for promoting impersonality by cropping the head off some of his models. But Mapplethorpe explains that when his models preferred anonymity he simply cut their heads off.

For Mapplethorpe's images, stripped of the spontaneity of real life in motion, the poses take on, at least for me, the dispassionate, matter-of-factness of the acts themselves. There is an almost Platonistic quality to the registration of the ideal, simplified presentations of these acts. The negation of the physiological by the artistic and the dispassionate makes the pornographic response impossible.
ally do not have." And "I don't know how to describe them, but I don't think they are very different from body parts." The photograph of the calla lily is a case in point. The stamen is certainly phallic, while the white petals seem vaginal. More over the mere existence of the eroto- pornographic image infects our interpretation of more neutral imagery. These photographs, Malraux would say, talk to each other. Hence by form and by association these images take on the pornographic role. But, like the frankly sexual images, the flower images are utterly transformed by the artistic role. The backgrounds are subdued; symmetry dominates the composition; and the pictures are constructed with strong contrasts of light and dark.

Several of the images in Maplethorpe are frankly humorous. The image of Grace Jones painted by Keith Haring tickles us with her ridiculous black-and-white body paint, her spiral beard design and her headdress that won't quite. More hilarious is the image of Louise Bourgeois, (1982). She holds a yard-long phallic, Andy Warhol's (1986) presents a blank stare directly addressed to us with a frame in the form of a cross, "part saint, part Wizard of Oz," says Morriarico.

When asked if his images were pornographic or if they had some other redeeming social value, Mapplethorpe replied, "I think it could be pornographic. I think they still have redeeming social value. It can be both, which is my whole point in doing it—to have all the elements of pornography and yet have a structure of lighting that makes it go beyond what it is." And this brings us to recall that the images are highly stylized and highly artistic.

Mapplethorpe's use of simplified compositions, often stark contrast of light and dark and analysis of his work. Consider the symmetry of Ken Moody, (1980) in which a hairless black man is shown eyes closed, with no expression, the contemplative Buddha. The paired bold heads of Ken Moody and Robert Sherman, (1986) in its starkness and parallel juxtaposition recalls a pair of marble busts. One set of images features that form of sexuality, I felt that I could get something out of that experience that no one else had done before. It was new territory without any rules." And "I don't think anyone understands sexuality. What's it about? It's about an unknown, which is why it's so exciting." EMBARRASSMENTS OF BEAUTY.

It wasn't until the 1970s that a greater acceptance of homosexuality developed and sexual prohibitions somewhat relieved. This was the background that made Mapplethorpe's images possible. But even so, he operated at the boundaries of acceptability. Beside the purely pictorial beauty of the photographs, Barthes finds in Maplethorpe's Young Man with Arms Extended the "abrupt excellence of a being, body and soul together. This boy with his arm outstretched, his radiant smile, though his beauty is in no way classical or academic, and though he is half out of the photograph, shifted to the extreme left of the frame, incarnates a kind of blissful eroticism." power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior.

CONFUSION OF MEANING AT THE SOCIO- POLITICAL LEVEL: THE PERFECT MOMENT Toward that end, what we were to see about Maplethorpe's life and contrary to his expectation, his ship came in. Following the What's New repertory piece, the city spent several million dollars worth of prints and was flooded with opportunities to exhibit. ironic because with his illness he was unable to spend the money. Howard Read pointed out that, "We had a huge run-up in sales. It was like Wall Street, except that this was the real thing where people are buying it for death." It was in this era of positivity that the University of Pennsylvania fine arts department of the Art mounted the 150-piece retrospective called the Robert Mapplethorpe. The Perfect Moment. The show featured three portfolios, X, Y, and Z. The former contained the notorious sadomasochistic images. The show was exhibited without incident and was the largest crowd-pleasing art event of the year. In April 1989, the Reverend Donald Wildmon sent a letter to every member of Congress complaining of Serrano's Piss Christ. The result was that 36 senators signed a letter calling for changes in the funding of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The Perfect Moment was to go to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The director, Christina Orr-Cabell, advised spectators not to attend the show and then cared in to political pressure, claiming that by closing the show they were really protecting the artist. The show was moved into The Washing- ton Project for the Arts, a venue run by artists. In September 1989 Orr-Cabell expressed her relief over offending the arts community and subsequently resigned in December. The Perfect Moment had been shown in Hartford and Berkeley with little incident. In April 1990, the show opened in Cincinnati at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) and the director, Dennis Barrie, was fired on orders from the city. Ironically, as a result of the notoriety, The Perfect Moment show drew the largest crowds in the museum's history. The CAC and Barrie were acquitted in October.

The reactions of the various players leading up to, and following the events illustrate how the four poles of meaning were confused. Each social group had its set of biases which determined the weights attached to the different poles. The conclusion results from a failure to attend the various poles in terms of their social content. The politicians, the artists, and the critics are each guilty of this shortcoming. Their responses are merely the logical working out of these biases in the public arena.

The art critic community also misunderstood Maplethorpe. On the one hand critics treated Maplethorpe more generously when he was seriously ill. One artist's judgment became inextricably bound to the morose and S&M imagery and therefore reflected political and sexual biases. The critics were even confused by genre issues. In addition, since he straddled the territory between photography and other art forms, he was never accepted by the straight photography world of Gurry Wittenberg and Lee Friedlander, or William Eggleston, nor was he fully at home in the world of contemporary painting and sculpture. Thus even with in the arts community, the fragmentation of identity associated with the different working procedures tended to isolate Maplethorpe as an outsider.
THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF LUIS
GONZÁLEZ PALMA

FERNANDO CASTRO

Luis González Palma’s work was first shown in Houston in 1993 as part of the Latin American exhibits of FotoFest. If one were to ask retrospectively what exactly it was that was so impressive about his work, an important answer would be: his portraits of indigenous peoples of Guatemala like La rosa (1984) and La esparanza (1990). I reluctantly call them "portraits" because they are not intended as depictions of the individuals they denote; but rather, as impersonations of archetypical characters of myth, popular culture and/or the poetic imagination of the artist. González Palma has continued, mutatis mutandis, producing these portraits throughout the nineties: El solalde (1993), El cielor (1994); and more recently, 80 mas, 56 (1998), La mirada crítica (1998) and Trauma y añilamar (1998).

Other portraits of Guatemalan Native-Americans had been featured at FotoFest 1990 in the work of Hans Namuth Los Toldos Santeros. But Namuth’s work, although impressive in its own right, is fairly straightforward whereas González Palma’s work (not plain Palma, as some would have it) follows different paths —zigzagging along, circling others’ paths and branching off into untraveled territories. In order to understand a little better González Palma’s work, I will attempt to walk along those paths.

The obvious and most conspicuous place to start is tone. González Palma’s prints are generally glazed with a dark sepia medium that tones all but selected portions of his prints. Various interpretations have been given for this prominent feature of his work. Some have found in this earthy monochromatism a connection with Goya’s dark paintings. Others have connected it with the way paintings and frescoes in churches look after hundreds of years of exposure to the smoke of candles, incense and the exhalations of devotees. Others have underscored the resemblance that his toned prints have with the back on which ancient Mayans allegedly wrote. This last suggestion is particularly germane because, according to the Popol Vuh, the first act of creation is dawn; and bringing the world out of darkness is part of González Palma’s poetics. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive; more than likely, González Palma is flipping into all these outlets simultaneously — thus exemplifying a culturally diverse tradition of image-making and exposing his own aesthetic eclecticism.

In many González Palma’s portraits only the eyes of the subjects are spared the sepia tone so as to imbue their gaze with an engaging, confrontational and almost hypnotic quality. Take the case of America (1990), a portrait of a young woman whose name happens to be “America”— the title is both exact and metonymic. The white of the eyes irradiates a light that subliminally leads the viewer into St. Augustine's intuition that its source is the luminosity of the spirit. Through toning González Palma establishes a metaphor central to much of his work, namely, that the life of many indigenous Guatemalans transpires in darkness (the sepia tone) although their spirit (the glistening eyes) prevails and endures. It is clear that González Palma endorses their cause and makes the brunt of his camera bear a political message for their liberation. Many would argue that the political impact of art beyond the narrow boundaries of the art world is more often the unwitting design of censors. But González Palma belongs to that breed of artists who believe that art itself has a spiritual luminosity and power whose social effects should not be underestimated.

The depiction of González Palma’s indigenous subjects is a way of changing the historical perceptions about them for themselves and for us. Pedagogically, it is a forced act of self-knowledge whose main lesson is: “You are the protagonists of your own history.” Unfortunately, what is screamed for some is heard as song by others who see only the exoticism of the imagery. This kind of ambivalence is characteristic of the ideological paradigms like beauty or freedom. On one interpretation, for example, the luminous gazes are the light of reason: human rights, republicanism and rationality (ideals of the Enlightenment). Therein lies a connection with Goya’s Caprichos El aura de la razón produce monstruos at that has an ambiguity that reveals the bright and dark sides of reason. From the Native-American perspective, “Enlightened” rationality has been a double-edged sword: insofar as it has been the conceptual tool for liberation as well as for exploitation. González Palma has explicitly pointed to that ambivalence in one of his most conceptual and avant garde installations: Historias Panamericanas (1993). The installation consists of a series of transparencies of white shirts ridden with bullet holes. González Palma identifies the shirts of “Parallel Histories” as those of Maximalist, Archdeak of Austria who, in 1864, was imprisoned in Mexico as emperor by Napoleon III and Mexican conservatives. In an epoch when for the very first time a Zapotec Native-American, Benito Juárez, was elected president of Mexico (a process for which Enlightenment ideals are partially responsible), a European monarch was forced militarily on a sovereign American republic. Ironically, Maximilian turned out to be more liberal (read, “Enlightened”) than the Mexican reactionaries would have wished; Juárez shared more reformist views with him than with some of his own allies. Nevertheless, Juárez ordered his execution not only because Maximilian himself had ordered the execution of republican guerrilleros but also because he was the incarnation of imperialism. Thus, Historias Panamericanas is also a reflection on the impersonality of violence; it was not Maximilian’s person that was important in deciding his execution but his inanimate symbolized by his shirt.

An equally important feature of González Palma’s work is the way he consistently endows the image of Native-Americans with an almost irresistible beauty. To do so, González Palma slides the canons of European beauty along indigenous traits — a concept spelled out in Rajínez (1998). The trinity — beauty, truth and goodness — is a Platonic amalgam whose persuasive power has not dwindled since antiquity, but whose currency was challenged — among others — by the part of the historical European avant-garde. German artists of the so-called New Objectivity movement, like Max Beckmann and Otto Dix, brutally, even grotesquely, depicted the bourgeois society of their time. For these artists beauty was clearly a distraction and contrary to their aims of critical objectivity. Beauty, however, is a value with which the Latin American avant gardes have found it harder to dispense. In González Palma’s work beauty conspires to enable his indigenous subjects. Through the rhetorical power of beauty the viewer is rendered more susceptible to fully accept their humanity just as 300 years ago Bartolomé de las Casas...
Long and Scream

comes from the tragic facility of looking for "disappeared" ones with ID photos not only in Guatemala but throughout the continent — in a sense, a debunking of the idea that photography’s main function is to document and/or identify. Indeed, something as unimmetic and unemotional as DNA is a better tool for identifying the dead as well as clarifying the kinship of all humans.

That González Palma has not always relied exclusively on an aesthetic of beauty is clearer in his early work where there is even a hint of the grotesque. In Imágenes de Pájaros y Dolor (Images of Child Suffering and Pain) (1969) or La Muerte Rayna (Death Rules) (1970), González Palma exposes his connection to Joel-Peter Witkin’s work. If only a few of González Palma’s images can be regarded as grotesque it is perhaps because since then the rhetoric of beauty was so steadfastly established throughout his opus that it entices the viewer to regard works like Deer (1991) and The Moth (1998) as something more akin to the sublime than to the grotesque. Beauty, therefore, is also a strategy for persuading the viewer into accepting different paradigms, if not of beauty (whose parameters are historically and ideologically fairly well-defined in spite of the enthusiasm of many who relativize it), then, of artistic representation. González Palma recycles a whole gamut of religious, popolar, ancient, mythical, and media icons. In Lamenta I and Lamenta II, for example, he alludes to the game of lottery whose images — according to María Cristina Orrico (one of his first commentators) — were used to convert Native-Americans to Catholicism. In order to address issues like emigration, more recent works like Tensiones heréticas (1997) leave behind not only beauty but also the representation of Native-Americans as a potentially exotic specimens.

In a way, González Palma’s eclectic work allows us to discern two epiphanies in his artistic persona. One is spelled out by the rhetoric of the titles of his books, exhibits and some of his works (Pleums of Sorrow, Wedding of Saditude) — a modernista à la Rubén Darío, with a clear penchant for beauty. A second one is an avant garde installation artist à la Boltanski. It is in this second aspect of his work that most impressed me about his work in 1992. González Palma irreverently tears photographic prints, nails them to rough supports; collages legal documents and pins ribbons to the praxis invents ritual uses popular culture. A horror of issues of authenticity, veracity, even morality that photography in the documentary mode had defined within its own paradigm, were thereby forced into revision.

González Palma — Bric Germansater or Mario Cravo Neto — makes no effort to hide his staging and his choreography. It remains unclear what degree of complicacy he has with his subjects who usually include his wife, friends and workers. In a sense, González Palma preempted issues of validation and authenticity. His work in 1992 was in the avant garde of Latin American photography; and the notion of the avant garde — in worth remembering — is always contextual.

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* Houston Center for Photography *
Photographing China

ANDREW E. NELSON

New York-based photographer Lois Conner has photographed in China for more than 15 years, and the evolution of her relationship with China, and the pace of China's own change, are recorded in a new book, *China: The Photographs of Lois Conner*. Lotus, an exhibition at the Laurence Miller Gallery in New York City, coincided with the book's publication.

Her fascination with China began during Conner's graduate studies in photography at Yale. An art history class on Chinese scroll painting introduced her to both the cinematic narrative of long scroll paintings — viewed by unrolling the scroll in the right hand, and simultaneously winding the previously viewed portion in the other hand — and the landscape of southern China. At first convinced that the jarring vertical limestone karst formations depicted in the scrolls were exaggerations, if not outright inventions, Conner would eventually go to see for herself, with the aid of a 1994 fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation.

The camera that Conner took along was not the 8 x 10" view camera she had used as a student at Yale. Instead, she carried a "banquet camera," a view camera producing a 7 x 17" negative and originally designed for photographing large groups of people — as at long banquet tables. In Conner's hands, the banquet camera's broad negative becomes a complex narrative, forcing the viewer's focus to move through the image in a way that approximates the scroll-painting's linear story. Some of her photographs, made from several negatives printed in series, expand the narrative structure to wall-size.

Reflecting the centuries-old influence of scroll paintings, Conner's earliest photographs of Guanzhi are picorial in the extreme, muted images of a fantastic landscape contact printed on a heavy-weight tracing vellum, sensitized by hand with a solution of platinum and palladium salts. Conner has returned to China almost every year since her first photographic trip there, and the work has gained complexity as she has come to know the country and its changing face. She travels alone, buoyed by a talent for languages, an instinctive fluidity with her camera and a back strong enough to carry 40 pounds of camera, tripod and 20 large sheets of film up stairs, over mountains, through the desert and on and off innumerable trains, bicycles and camels.

Excepting four pictures taken in India, the Laurence Miller Gallery's exhibition *Lotus* showcased Conner's photographs of China. But rather than structuring the exhibition as a digest of China: The Photographs of Lois Conner, the exhibition's title and organizing theme referenced Conner's long interest in the Asian lotus, a photographic touchstone. Slightly more than half of the exhibition's contents were photographs of lotuses — from leaves to flowers, stems and seed pods — and of depictions of lotuses, in paintings, decorations, iron fences and other settings.

Conner's depictions of lotus plants make them seem at once achingly exotic (fringed with suggestions of Oedipean intoxication and tragic trance) and profoundly earthbound. While her horizonless photographs of lotus in still water can reduce the plants to a calligraphic dance of stems and blossoms, perfectly inverted in the water's reflective surface, they are as likely to depict the tangles of seed pods
and wilted leaves, sinking and decaying just below the surface. The latter depictions save the lotus photographs from the trap of the languidly picturesque, but the images still suffer from a measure of sameness, and in the exhibition quickly blended together into an atmosphere of beauty and decay seemingly unconnected to any particular photograph.

The exhibition's photographs of depictions of lotus flowers in art and architecture --- including the aforementioned photographs from India --- are stronger, in their overt engagement with contradictions. One of the strongest, Mysore, India, (1990) depicts a wall covered with what look like campaign posters of a wailing man, decorated liberally with a lotus blossom motif. The image at once combines the seedy and the mystical, as does Shanghai, (1999), a richly dark nighttime image of fabric effigies of fish and lotus blossoms, fixed on stilts above a river. The downward angle of the camera, however, frames the assemblage against a background of stained concrete pillars holding motley buildings above murky water.

The decision not to attempt a survey of the new book's contents makes more sense upon examination of the book.

China: The Photographs of Lois Conner is an enormous selection of Conner's richly contradictory images of contemporary China. The fact that the photographs are all contemporary, with the oldest in the book from the mid-1980s, is to varying degrees difficult to believe. The weathered towns and blasted landscape of western China's high-desert Gansu and Xinjiang provinces receive the same thoughtfully merciless gaze as the skyscraper rooftops and tangled traffic of Shanghai and the high-rise warrens of endless Hong Kong apartment blocks. And the bamboo scaffolds still in use in modern Chinese building construction echo the bamboo scaffolds of laborers trimming trees in the same year and in the same city.

China makes the case, visually, that such contrasts are an inextricable element of life in China. As her essential understanding of these small ironies increases, Conner has begun more frequently to turn her camera upon the people she meets in her travels. The portraits that result (for they are, in the truest sense, portraits) clarify and confound at once, in the direct intensity of the subjects' gaze, their simultaneous wariness and curiosity, and the irresistible complexity of the large rectangular negative.

In her Notes in the book, Conner writes affecting of the (sometimes overwhelming) attention she receives while photographing, telling for example the story of making an early morning photograph beside a lake in Hangzhou and finding as she sets up her camera that a crowd was gathering behind her, soon to number some 500 curious souls. In effectively turning the camera around, Conner creates some of the book's strongest pictures, like the deadpan Guzhangzhou, Guanzhong, (1993), four fash-


tionable ladies (three dressed in jackets from the same pattern) arrayed before a background (including left to right) a crowd of pedestrians, a parka-ed child sitting on the ground, five distinctly Caucasian fashion mannequins, a pile of gravel and three men mixing cement.

The sweep of China carries the reader from images of landscape seemingly untouched by human intervention, to photographs in which all is the product of the human hand, where the rivers are of concrete instead of water and mountains are replaced by buildings. And then we return to the countryside, along the way our gaze returned by a handful of the 1.5 billion Chinese from Tiananmen Square to the steps of Inner Mongolia.

Conner's relationship with China is an engagement as deep as that of Brassai with Paris or in many ways as strong as the familial bonds that fueled Sally Mann's years-long examinations of her children and family. Conner's eye and her exquisite prints (reproduced better in the book's tribunes than anyone has a right to expect) the tones richly saturating a heavy uncoated paper stock bring to a pur the components of her China, melding together water, stone, trees, sand, concrete, paper, mud, construction, destruction and the calm bemusement of China's people as they are confronted by a small fearless woman and her large camera. Returning to China over and over again, Conner and her camera have themselves become a part of the landscape.

At this writing. Conner is back in China, photographing.

Andrew S. Nelson is a freelance writer based in Houston, Texas. Lois Conner was her first photography teacher.

• Houston Center for Photography •
Entering the Underworld

Joan Seeman Robinson

There is an image of Sally Gall’s, Into Darkness, that is deeply disorienting. Up to the late 1990s her photographs of nature have implied the stance of the viewer — poised on a cliff, entering a swamp, brushing through a field of sunflowers, perched on a pool’s edge. And one always sensed an infrastructure of horizontals and verticals inferring an underlying order, a reassuring stability, even when spatial wrarps or gauzy shrouds made us doubt the serenity of such prospects.

Into Darkness is a landmark in Gall’s career because she has grown underground to photograph caves. Vanishing Point, 1999, in black and white, has as its focus an impermeable black hole whose flinty borders seem to twist in a counter clockwise direction. A chalky white wall surrounds it. In the left foreground a glossy gray peak sprouts an inverted twin peak whose upper mass twines snakily around the hole’s irrotated outline. The effect is of a swirling light or an aerial weather map of a spinning hurricane. The image is expressively and formally both rolling and swirling.

On closer examination one sees that the scale of the entire chamber is actually as vast as its cosmic effect, for at the base of the “black hole” there are minuscule footprints in sand. Gall is within a real cave but its cavernous depth is blacked out with later darkroom manipulations. Its centripetal and threatening force is both quelled and magnified by her intensifications of light and dark. Gall forces the issue of the known and the unknown, beauty and terror, through her control of tones, textures and values. Despite our experiential knowledge of chambers and corridors, the spinning black vortex seems to press forward ominously. It is illogical and unnerving in its blust impermeability — menacing, dystrophobic and even more imponderable when we finally note a watery canyon far below, its three-dimensionality unmodified, its great stones shrunken like pebbles. Vanishing Point, (and in another print, Shift), it is this silent transit of water that not only suggests passage but associates it with the earth’s creation. Vanishing Point is at the core of this mid-career work, a sign of the probity of this new “landscape,” a summons to consider its myriad dimensions. While Gall waits for the critical moment to capture and compose her subjects (using only available light), her darkroom interventions frequently circle spatial depth in an attempt to perpetuate the timeless significance of these perceptions. In memory, after all, it is not motion, volume and mass which persist, but an iconic resonance which is an ineradicable, often illogical, mystical quotient requiring transformation, a “going beyond” in order to be real. She intensifies the spiritual issues black is the unknown, light is blinding, gray is the scum through which we must pass. It is as if Gall is warning us of our presumptive knowledge of planet earth and creating an icon of the yet unperforated — a warning of what might lie ahead — and within.

Looking back at her career, one collects that she has always sought the inexplicable in nature. A student of the history of photography, yes, but a visionary in her own right, she has been lightly called a romantic for her earlier series on seashores, a pictorialist for her misty reveries in gardens. To the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries the “Sublime,” as they termed it, was actually to be “aweful,” or full of awe. Gall finds beauty in all things terrestrial, but beauty is defined and enhanced by its opposites — she emphasizes the unsettling, the far more, the precipitous. That is how real dimensions of depth are unearthed.

Vanishing Point and Shift, with their hidden recesses, are eerie destinations in a journey which begins with entrances into caves, as in Spell and Departure. One can read these, and Frontier, as both leaving and reentering the outer world. Once inside, in Safe Light, a silent sea of indeterminate size flows around a distant craggy peak — or is it a miniature island with tiny harbors and inlet? Its pointy shape is reencountered in Sol, where the tower of a Buddhist shrine rises from yet another promontory. In another remarkable image a huge, pendulous ceiling hovers planet-like over an immense chamber, where willowy ladders are propped for access to back grooves. At their base stands a silvery man, barely visible on the floor of this underground forge. We finally are released through Omi and Observatory, eccentric openings (a leaf-like shape that is round but pointed at one end, appearing in many of Gall’s compositions), that seems, after the interior darkness, to yearn for the sky. Rocks and plants fringe their mouths making the blinding daylight appear almost celestial, as if the shimmering air and the blackened forests beyond promise a spiritual transcendence rather than simply a recovered terrain.

Gall has engaged in serious research on the subject of caves. She has traveled globally to study, experience and photograph them, crossing their thresholds alone, laden with backpack, tripod and a heavy Hasselblad camera. Photographing caves has meant literally entering the earth, its corpus, seeing the very porosity...
and permeability of its shifting plates, its water-carved corridors and caverns, the membranous webbing of stalactites and stalagmites formed by the drip, dripping of water. This has been no expeditionary enterprise. At mid-career she wanted to go "down under, into the depths." And, she seems to see through her subjects. We are intensely aware of her meditative approach to nature, the arresting beauty of these settings, of stillness and calm. This is partly because she works only in black and white. (One cannot imagine her electing the effulgence of color; its optical demands and sensuousity would clamor for attention.) She seeks a tonal range solicitous of the subtler states of mind, enhancing them with the complex and elusive qualities of her own experience. If, as I say, she seems to see through her subjects, it is also to suggest that she, in turn, is penetrated by them. In fact, these new images are larger than any of her previous work. They are now 28" x 28" rather than 24" x 24". The impulse to be at one with her views, can be chronicled throughout her career by the recurring theme of water, and is moored in memories of family vacations. The experience of seeing, feeling and thinking is for her a pondering of the potentials and the ultimate mysteries latent in the natural world — and which she further explores in the darkroom. As a result, we ourselves are often not sure that we know what we are looking at, or that we know where we are in relation to her images because her own relation to her subjects depends, as she says, on what emanates from them. It is "the power of nature itself" that drives her.

To be surrounded by these images from Gall's underworld is visually to sense silence. The flight of bats and the scent of their deposits are absent, as is the drip of the rainbow, the gurgle of the stream, the rustle of leaves, the fluttering of the breeze. Instead, it is the eye and the mind that are gazing upon the world. Sally Gall, a former Houston resident, is represented by Houston Gallery and currently resides in New York City.
DISTILLATIONS

DAVID FOKOS
JULY 8 - AUGUST 26, 2000
JOHN CLARY GALLERY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

SHANNON STONEY

Arsenal Adams was forced of quoting a maxim of Wright's: the purpose of fine art photography is to make an image that reveals "what you saw and felt." The feeling past, in his mind, was what made art photography different from ordinary documentation. David Fokos' exhibition exemplifies this maxim to the fullest. He talks about the first photograph he ever made that really expressed his feelings about the New England coast: "There wasn't any real subject matter — it was a photograph of a feeling."

Fokos' photographs are austere and minimalistic, and contain relatively few objects. But there is subject matter. The subject is the horizon, where sea and sky meet. In virtually all of the photographs in this exhibition: True, this is a rather minimal subject: a mere line in most cases. But the variations within that theme where Fokos finds what makes the subject fascinating to him and to the viewer.

Incoming Ferry, Orr's Island, Massachusetts, (1997). introduces the main theme of the show: sea and sky. This is one of the few images in which something obviously moves. The long exposure causes the ferry to become two or three slightly blurry lines, parallel to the horizon line. Rather than interrupting the viewer's contemplation of the still sea and the cloudless sky, the ferry becomes almost a part of the horizon itself. It is not recognizable immediately as a ferry, but rather, becomes an abstraction like the flat planes of sea and sky.

The theme of movement becoming stillness is a recurring one. Fokos in his artist statement explains that his long exposures cause the waves of the ocean to average out to a sort of flat, still, totally calm sceming sea. In Daybreak, Chilmark, Massachusetts, (1999), all we see are two rocks with mist around them and the horizon line. What we see as mist is really the average of the waves breaking on the rocks over several minutes. The waves become a blur, an abstract element, rather than discreet events, just as the moving ferry became two blurred lines. But even in this very minimal composition, Fokos does not omit his habit of directing the viewer's eye to the horizon: the foreground rock is somewhat square, so that its sides point to the vanishing point on the horizon. The rock behind it, though, is relatively round, with nothing rectilinear about it. This, again, is a recurring theme: rigid geometry offset by softly curving, organic lines.

Two photographs, both of mooring rings in Boston Harbor, that particularly exemplify this contrasting of rigid rectilinear composition with organic-looking curves. The mooring rings cast dark, mirroring shadows on the perfectly still water; the rings and their shadows creating oblong shapes enclosing the concrete rounds, the whole effect being somewhat like cells with nuclei. In the background of Mooring Rings, Study #1, Boston, Massachusetts, (1997), we see a very misty bridge and some trees, in light values against the sky, again, where the sky and water meet. In Mooring Rings, Study #4, Boston, Massachusetts, (1998), that line between water and sky disappears, as the mist apparently obliterates the horizon, and all we see to mark the horizon is a few misty trees. Again, Fokos' subject seems to be the horizon: its appearing and disappearing, the objects that mark the line of the horizon and the different tonalities that can happen where sky meets ocean.

A few compositions break some of the rules that Fokos has seemed to establish in his signature scene: one is Mining Rail, Boston, Massachusetts, (1997). This image shows a strikingly different relationship between sea and sky: the sea is totally white, and the sky begins at a very dark line at the horizon. The whole composition is radically bisected by a guardrail that sweeps from the lower right to the middle left of the picture. Perfectly crisp droplets of fog or rain adhere to the smooth metallic rail and we see no detail of the texture of the concrete below the rail. One part of the rail is missing, conveniently, so that the composition not become too static. This is perhaps the most dynamic of the compositions in the show: furthermore, it is a masterpiece of exposure and printing and tonality.

The most idiosyncratic image is Store Drive, Beacon, Massachusetts, (1998), where Fokos photographed one end of the underside of a freeway bridge arch. Here the "horizon" is the bottom of the arch, where the arch meets the ground. The lines converging to this horizon come from above, down to meet it, rather than from below, curving upward, as in all the other compositions. This image almost seems to be meant as a joke in the context of the all the other pictures, a sort of upside-down version of the others: a delightful comment on the difference between man-made landscapes and landscapes made by the earth.

Fokos uses a slightly wide angle lens (21mm), a very small aperture and long exposures to make 'x's 10' negatives, which in the early 1990s he began to process digitally. He does all of his manipulations of the image digitally; then the paper is exposed using a laser printer to make his 36' by 36' prints. Fokos prints on color paper to get the warm tonalities he prefers. This beautiful, subtle tonal quality is very evident in such prints as Two Rocks, Chilmark, Massachusetts, (1999). Fokos photographed one place — the coast of Massachusetts — almost exclusively for 30 years. This dedication to one place and project illustrates the value of focused attention on one subject or place. A person who can sit still for long enough to make a long exposure is also a person who can be patient enough to photograph the same beloved landscape for many years without getting bored of it. These are unusual qualities in the current art scene, which appears to be almost solely about novelty and pop culture. Fokos' meditative, quiet compositions may be a sign, though, of better things to come.

Shannon Stoney is a writer and photographer in Houston.

All photographs courtesy of John Clary Gallery, Houston.
Daido Moriyama: Stray Dog

SANDRA PHILLIPS and
ALEXANDRA MUNNIX, CURATORS
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND DISTRIBUTED ART PUBLISHERS

REBECCA FOLEY

The images are dark and contrasty, grainy and imperfect. Some are bleached to abstraction; others are marked with scratches. But it is not correctness that has created these imperfections nor are the compositions haphazard. Daido Moriyama, working in the advent of political and social change and post World War II, created a form of documentation: photography as a sophisticated extension of human experience.

Born just outside of Osaka, Japan, in 1938, Moriyama trained as a graphic design student at the Osaka Municipal School of Industrial Art. He worked briefly in that field before pursuing photography, a move that led him to an apprenticeship with local professional Takeji Iwamiya. In 1966, Moriyama went to Tokyo to join the photographer's co-operative VIVO, which was on the brink of dissolution. He convinced one of the members, Eikoh Hosoe, to hire him as an assistant, and he worked for him for three years. VIVO was the first collaborative professional photographer's organization in postwar Japan. Members were trying to establish a new visual territory, consciously trying to describe the new society that emerged after the war. The work grew expanded upon the photographic tradition, although it differed both from the journalistic work published during the war and from the earlier tradition of Japanese art photography. The work was personal and psychological, made with 35mm film and printed with enlarged grain, as was the style of the times. The photographers were responding to their new society.

Post WWII Japan was undergoing a drastic change, as traditional ways were being fused to inside, more modern, more western ideals of lifestyle. American influence was pervasive, especially due to the presence of the United States military that had established many military bases in the country as part of the post war agreement.

The influence of contemporary American artwork is easily identified in Moriyama's work. Here is the texture of William Klein, the appropriation of Andy Warhol. Klein's book, New York, was possibly the first art photography book viewed by Moriyama. The impact of the images must have ingrained themselves in terms of style and aesthetic. Klein was a street photographer in the tradition of Weegee and Brassai, but his images were bold, confrontational and larger than life. Printed in full bleed, each photograph was enlarged to such a degree that the grain of the negative was not only apparent, but emphasized. Other habits of Klein's printing included drastic bleaching, which resulted in high, graphic contrast. Warhol's influence can also be seen, sometimes in subject, sometimes in style. Ayaoura, 1969 (Cat. No. 29) has Warhol's soup cans, and another print with the same title has his Coca Cola bottles (Cat. No. 1968). Accessory Feature, 1967 (Cat. No. 193) is reminiscent of Warhol's screen prints of death and disaster, and the practice of appropriating, as seen in Moriyama's photographing of posters (Brigitte Bardou Poster, Ayaoura, 1969, Cat. No. 84), films (Bonnie and Clyde, 1966, Cat. No. 89) and television (Professional Midget Wrestling, Television, 1968-70, Cat. No. 51) shows the influence of Warhol.

But Moriyama made these seemingly American images in Japan, emphasizing a transformation towards a more Western approach of culture.

This "new" Japan was the core of Moriyama's work, as it was for other artists. Most Japanese art from the 1960s and early 1970s, spanning all art forms including visual arts and theater arts, was deeply shocking and provocative, reactive to political and social concerns. This challenge to photographers was to try to extract lyrical expression from charged and complex subject matter. Moriyama was shaped by his contemporaries, who found deep emotional energy from their subject matter. Eikoh Hosoe was the first internationally recognized artistic photographer of his generation in Japan and also a successful commercial photographer. Hosoe collaborated with author Yukio Mishima and created a body of work entitled Orual and Rows, a project that originated from Mishima's need for a publicity photograph. Because he had access to the VIVO files, Moriyama spent hours studying contact sheets, learning the work of his teacher as well as of the other VIVO members. But Moriyama was more influenced by the work of Shomei Tomatsu, who did not have a commercial career.

Unlike his contemporaries and mentors, Moriyama worked with no political motivation behind his work. As of this time, there was a split between photographers who shot subjective and objective styles of photography, but Moriyama belonged to neither faction. Leftist organizations fought the American and capitalist ideas that were entering their culture, and these groups championed the Marxist ideals of the avant garde, which believed in the rights of the working class. Photographers who held these ideals sought to capture a social image that was subjective and furthered their political interest by portraying a society that needed improvement. This movement occurred after the original post war movement, where photographers sought to capture a purely objective and journalistic depiction of the world around them. Because there was a ban on photography and journalism during the war, afterwards there was a surge of photographic interest and activity. Instead, Moriyama's work was of a different philosophical photograph what is, take pictures "on the fly" and try to understand the context of actual experience, not predetermine, not created with a goal in mind.

So, in a sense, Moriyama is more than just a street photographer. He is a landscape photographer, capturing his surroundings of people and culture and environment. He has saved for us glimpses of an eye, and lets us go wherever he has gone. Most pieces are titled with date and location, and the images are varied and real, a scene of sexuality (Hotel, Shilysha, 1969, Cat. No. 91), a view out of a train-smear window (Tokyo, Night, 1968-70, Cat. No. 69), the beach (Hanyama, 1966, Cat. No. 15), a menacing dog in the street (Stray Dog, Miehama, Aomori, 1977, Cat. No. 13). Almost every image is characterized with bold lines, horizontal and vertical, giving them a visual confidence that highlights each subject. Moriyama's work is of the actual here is a conscious documentation of existence in a culture that is being pulled in two directions.

Rebecca Foley is a writer and photographer in Houston.
Rick Williams

WORKING HANDS

TEXAS A&M PRESS, 2000

ROY FLUKINGER

When Rick Williams first saddled up in the early 1980s and rode out with the cowboys who worked the ranches around Albany, Texas, he recognized that he was not pioneering new territories of photo documentation. As ingrained into the folklore and consciousness of this state as the fact and the myth of the cowboy must be, we have long recognized that this peculiar subject matter has and probably always will attract the visual artists as well as all classes of our society, from writers to television viewers. The trails that popular culture and romanticism have cut through Texas and the American West are deep and long established, and anyone venturing out across the prairie must negotiate them in their own independent fashion.

What distinguished Williams’ vision and interpretation was his interest in these men who work one of the hardest jobs in our nation and yet are traditionally abstracted into certain roles and characters by our modern culture. He excelled the typical role of visiting professionals who come laden down with equipment and technical assistants into a landscape they do not know and among a people they care about only during their time before the lens. Williams climbed on the horse, lived the life for weeks at a time and learned more than just the names of his subjects. He recognized from the beginning that the cowboys were equal human beings, earning a paycheck, having families and kids and worrying about the same concerns that make up all our workdays, while still engaging in a hard and often uncompromising profession.

Beginning is perhaps the key word here. For the exquisitely composed and insightful images that came out in those first few years were only the start for Williams. His early years of eloquent personal photography showed that he could capture moments between family or friends and elevate them into poetic glimpses into the human condition. His largely urban lifestyle had awakened within him an enriched, natural curiosity for both the intensely human viewpoint as well as the larger cultural issues that permeate the life of each of us. As he himself puts it: "On one level I know that much of what I am seeking is already within me: that many of the discoveries I make in the sharing of my life and the creation of art with these people and with you are self-discoveries and self-revelations. Yet focusing on the lives of others in the images suggests that I am not simply expressing my own ideas. The images of real people at work are both interpersonally representative and intrapersonally symbolic, simultaneously graceful and powerful."

So, by natural instinct and personal commitment, Williams also took the time to look up and look around him, to see what else was going on and how it began to relate to Texans at the end of the 20th century. First, and perhaps most naturally, he found the oil field workers who shared the same landscapes and towns of West Texas together with the cowboys he knew. So he put on the hard hat, met the men who staked their futures upon the vagaries of geology and industry and proceeded to stake his curiosity by depicting these men and women who embraced another facet of the state’s economic platform. If the lifestyle remained largely “rural?” it was nonetheless people with equally complex individuals and just as subject to the realities and romanticism of our society as his previous subjects. The cowboy’s song had changed its instrumentation, but the words and tune were as equally encompassing of the emotions and dreams of its singers.
the security and filters, behind the face masks and eye goggles, he found yet another proud song led by yet another body of working Texans: "ion conductors of electronic symphonies (that) hum sweet music on the frontier of technology." On the surface the change may appear dramatic, but within the people — where Williams hums away while keeping eyes and camera working in unison — they share the same drive, the same concerns, the same heart.

In part this is a fairly obvious comparison: certainly true when we put similar images based upon graphic contexts, such as figural placement or gesture, in opposition. But design component is only one level of Williams' artistry. Within all his images there flourishes an eloquence of moment and a strong sense of place and time. Like many fine photographers he can put us there to see what people and places look like. For most photographers that is enough. Not for Williams. Beyond just literal elements, the photographs are both compositionally satisfying and abstractly challenging. They call attention equally to the humanity of their subjects and to the disparate feelings that are packed up within all our life-long experiences. Look into the eyes of the people Williams has brought before you, and you will see the same strength and individuality that appear in Russell Lee's Depression-era farmers and Bruce Davidson's urban dwellers. That is the true beauty that Rick Williams provides us with: that an artistic vision and a human content can build upon and arise above each other.

That the work is generated in the present is at once obvious and generously direct. Williams does not, so far, embrace a self-consciously modernist agenda or create fictives before his lens. (Not to say that he wouldn't one day. Those rebels as honest as he cannot exclude any possibilities where the heart — that "most fickle of all the muscles" as April Kapplor once called it — is concerned.) These are real people and places, recorded and interpreted as he has experienced them. That directness, that sense of the process of witness, that honest attempt to understand, is always at the foundation of the work. The titles of the works may hint at romance or universal mystery, but it gives us dates and names in the same direct manner as the lean and rich images are unfolded before us.

It is the day-to-day humanity that remains and perseveres and triumphs, whether the faces are shaded by a worn Stetson, hidden in the shadow of the sun, or shielded by the masks of a clean room.

However, unlike most solid photo-documentary work that surrounds us, the images do not stop there. Within this vision is an unbridled respect for the past — a reference and response not just to what has happened up to the point in time but to what has come before to our people and the land they spring from. We can read the contemporary in a work like Roundup at Sunrise, Matador Ranch, (1973) both from its date or the inclusion of the grace note of the rural pickup truck aimed at the print's edge in anticipation of an exit from the prairie stage.

The bulk of the composition — land and cowhands, horses and sky — could date from a century earlier, or even beyond. Historically, immortally — a century from now. It is the sheer timeliness of the photographs, referencing at once the everyday and the universal, that engenders discovery and reinforcement that there can be beauty and grace as both men and the sun come into sharp focus.

What pulls Williams' artistry into a realm beyond mere representation is not just the classical affinity of documentary photography to make the "real," but rather, "relevant" to us. Rather he has come to resolve the clarity of the photographer's inherent power of presence, so that the imagery will require our relevance to it. The photographs contain a beauty that surpasses the seeming simplicity of the most mundane and prosaic elements and elevates them to a higher, universal level — the "dance" of the cowhand at the corral gate, the gesture of the symphonic conductor in an oilfield worker's signal, or the butterfly-like rotation of workers on the airline and Micro Devices' spire. This is a breathtaking beauty, not mere prettiness, which comes from an affection — not for the everyday experience of the human animal in all manner of worldly environments and circumstances.

Photography by photographer Williams reveals a social panorama shaped by the ritual of the everyday and enriched by the grace of the extraordinary. The portrait that emerges is far more than that of three different lifestyles covering the last two decades. "Powers only succeeds if you are willing to work at it. The same thing goes for life too."

In terms of the literature of the state, Larry McMurtry observed such moments as those Williams has witnessed. He points out that these "images, as it happens, all come from Old Texas, but not one of them would not be hard to find in today's experience, or tomorrow's, moments that are just as eloquent, just as suggestive of gallantry or strength or disappointment. . . . Texas is rich in unredeemed dreams, and now that the dust of its herds is settling the writers will be out on their pencils, looking for them in the suburbs and along the mythical Pecos."

Williams rides these same trails. Indeed, the only qualification to add here is that it is equally the domain of artists and photographers as well — if not even more so. Poetry has less to do with choosing the right word or moment and a whole lot more with evoking and understanding the human and the spiritual. The quest through this dimension is and must be forever ceaseless — is as are his passions, his dreams, and his admiration of our immortal spirit. If you detect a commonality here — of purpose, of ideal, of almost useless quality — that is no coincidence. (Indeed, one of Williams' working titles for an earlier stage of this opus was Common Ground.) To possess a poetic vision is at once challenging and elating, but most especially when one is dealing with the everyday rather than the singularly epic. And it is within these moments of the experience of the common man and woman that Williams' photographs find transcendence. The instances that cross all our daily lives — elation, frustration, communication, industry, contemplation, achievement, loss, belief, faith — and elevate our labors and our energies to the heroic, which we may not recognize at all times but which we all share before each day's sunset.

This is the challenge, both for the modern artist and for the working man: to combine the prosaic of the everyday with the poetry of which life is capable. Williams assembles it photograph by photograph and word by word. But we all, each and every one, do it every day and in every place: side by side, heart to heart, dream to dream. Or, if you will, hand to hand.

* Playboy is Senior Curator of Photography and Film, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.
FOR MOST OF IT I HAVE NO WORDS: GENOCIDE • LANDSCAPE • MEMORY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON NORFOLK
INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF
DDEM LEWIS PUBLISHING

SIMON JAMES

Simon Norfolk earns his living as a photojournalist. He was born in 1950, brought up in Manchester and studied philosophy and sociology at Bristol University. The intended next step had been a move on to a PhD. However, while studying at Bristol he was introduced by his tutor to the work of a number of campaigning photographers, notably Joseph Koudelka’s book on The Gypsies, and Network photographer Mike Goldwater’s Fighting The Furnace. He says he was knocked over by Will Gompertz’s introduction to The Gypsies and began to think of photography as a sort of applied sociolog.

Feeling he might make more difference in the world working as a photographer than he would have done as a sociologist, he applied for a place in David Hurn’s course in Documentary Photography at Newport. On finishing the Newport course he moved to London and began working as a magazine photographer: firstly on Living Marxism, later moving to the Select picture agency which distributed his pictures to Die Spiegel, The Guardian and The Independent.

Politically Norfolk has always stood to the left of center, although more generally across Europe the salutes were a period of increased acceptability and ascendance for right wing political parties. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen controlled a considerable movement while in the UK for right parties achieved their first elected local counselor since the war and on several occasions generated enough support to be allowed televised party political broadcasts. Personally Norfolk was alarmed by these trends and, as a working photographer covering events associated with the rise of the British new right, found himself increasingly angered by the things he witnessed.

Ironically his personal journey began out of contact with two diametrically opposed individuals who attended those meetings: revisionist historian and British National Party philosopher David Riving, who denies the Nazis committed a genocide; and Leon Greenman, an elderly Jewish man prominent in counter-demonstrations outside. Greenman, a survivor of the death camps who wore a badge saying “I was there,” was sent to Auschwitz from Holland with his wife and two and a half year old son. The last Greenman ever saw of his family was on the death camp arrivals ramp. He was sent straight to the gas chamber while he was selected for slave labor and, against the fact that in the eyes of the perpetrators of genocide their act is one of sublime purification: Norfolk’s images insist with no note of equivocation that the history was left unturned in the bloodletting: classroom, clinic and church were all purified of the perceived taint of the Tuils. The images of atrocity presented in For most of it I have no words are worldwide but neither exhibition nor book claims to be exhaustive. Increasingly Norfolk’s notion of Memory, the final word in the title sequence, became of paramount importance. Traditional documentary seeks to tell their viewers what to think. Perhaps conscious of the amount written on this subject, Norfolk by contrast solely offers images of the remains or refers still evident at the places where the events took place. Although primarily motivated by an immense and visceral hatred for the crimes committed, these crimes he chooses not to present an essay of his own and restricts himself to brief captions at the end of the story. The title is not his statement but the final words of wartime American correspondent Edward R. Murrow’s radio despatch from Buchenwald concentration camp.

In the early part of the sequence, evidence of the atrocities and the charred remains of the victims lie openly on display. As the series progresses, however, obvious indicators become less visible until, towards the end of the series, all that is left is bleak, open, empty spaces. These images allude to the ephemeral nature of memory itself, while serving equally as metaphor for the sheer size of the crimes committed within their confines. With the sole exception of the Viennese boys, born after the conflict yet each day suffering its consequences, the living are deliberately restricted from the pages of this elegy. Little more than casual attention is given to the methodologies adopted by the perpetrators of genocide. That detail that is offered serves as a reminder of how little technology is in fact required to commit mass murder. In presenting the imagery without comment, the work transends any hierarchy of specific events to regard the nature of evil itself and the ease with which such vast crimes pass from memory.

We are now several generations, and, sadly, genocides, on from the last “wart” to end wars.” Our notion of history, and the memory of which we teach it, continues to change; but as Norfolk’s work ably and undeniably testifies, memory of atrocities continues to fade. As the stark, beautiful landscapes at the end of this series clearly remind us, memory decays as rapidly as physical evidence when left abandoned. Few today have no concept of the Holocaust but how many have ever heard of the Herero People? History, as Simon Norfolk tells us, is indeed about today, but only in memory resides hope for tomorrows yet to come.

Simon James is a photographer working and living in London, England.
Books Received

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


Merrill, Raymond & Miller Barth. A Thousand Hounds. New York, New York: Teasheen, 2000. 606 pages. Featuring more than 100 years (1879 to present), this book brings together over 400 color and black-and-white photographs of dogs taken by photographers and artists.


Compiled by Jennifer Counts and Samba Odeh

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