

SPOT

HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY • WINTER/SPRING 2004



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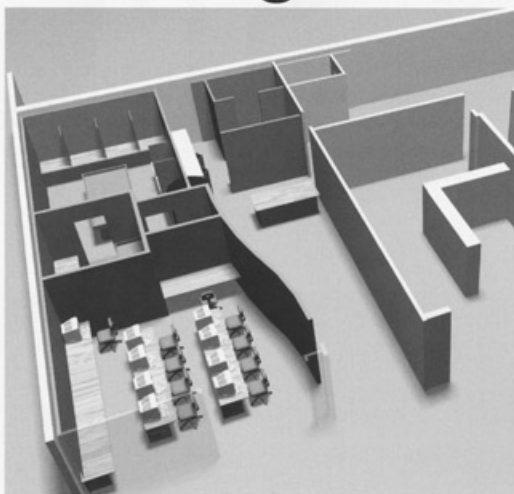
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Growing from the Center



Digital rendering, courtesy of Charles Wiese, Studio Polygonia

Houston Center for Photography is underway with a Capital & Capacity Building Campaign to create a state-of-the-art Learning Center to expand its facility and educational programs. The additional 1,500 square feet of space, contiguous to the current facility, will enable HCP to offer non-degree courses, demonstrations, and workshops in both chemical and digital photography for beginning through advanced participants. This additional educational programming will complement HCP's current activities, foster practical skills and knowledge and continue HCP's outstanding community outreach programs.

The current 3,500 square foot facility houses three galleries, administrative, library, preparation, workshop, and storage areas. The Main Gallery has 240 running feet of wall space. Galleries X & Y have a combined total of 99 running feet of wall space. With the addition of the Learning Center, HCP will fully occupy a freestanding, one-story building in the Menil Foundation complex.

The new Learning Center will house a black-and-white darkroom with eight enlarger stations and a digital laboratory with nine stations with state-of-the-art computers and support equipment. Also included will be a master darkroom, a film development room, a print finishing area, and a critique room. Harry Gendel, principal of Gendel Architects and an HCP board member, has created architectural drawings for the Learning Center.

The Capital & Capacity Building Campaign began in fall 2003 and is halfway to its goal of \$750,000. Committee members are reaching out to foundations, corporations, arts supporters, and friends of HCP to accomplish the goal. This fundraising effort will result in the remodeling, equipping, furnishing, and operating of the Learning Center. A new full-time staff member will implement educational programming in the Learning Center. A part of these funds will support capacity building activities to provide HCP with future strength and stability.

Houston Center for Photography, founded in 1981, has been at the forefront in promoting the photographic arts. HCP has garnered national and international renown as a showcase for emerging through established artists. It is a prominent member of Houston's arts community and a member of the Houston Museum District Association.

For years, HCP has provided hands-on instruction and educational experiences to its members and the community to develop and nurture photographers in the various technical aspects of photography. Generally, HCP has offered short-term workshops in a classroom or studio setting, mainly focused on lectures and discussions. The new on-site laboratory facilities at HCP will fulfill its goal to be a full-service arts center.

In 2001, HCP conducted strategic planning funded by Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County (CACHH) to assess the needs of the community in the area of photographic education. Results of the study demonstrated the requirement for broader access to the photographic arts, including digital media. The Learning Center's chemical and digital facilities and the expanded educational programming are a direct response to these identified community needs.

A variety of six or nine week courses and mini-courses will be offered for a diverse range of participants. HCP will offer black-and-white darkroom courses as well as digital photography in its new facility. Various community outreach programs will be developed for underserved youth. These participants will have the opportunity to take classes in chemical and digital photography in the Learning Center. Outreach programs will be offered both during the school year and in the summer. In future years, master workshops and artist residencies will be offered. Pilot programs will begin following the completion of the Learning Center build-out in Spring 2004.

Board and staff members worked closely to develop these plans for a new facility and its programmatic expansion and are prepared to see the project through to its implementation. HCP has received financial support for this project from 100% of its Board of Directors and Staff.

The organization has the strong support of its members, donors, funders, and the viewing public who consider the programmatic expansion plans as the next logical step in HCP's organizational growth and development. For the past 22 years, Houston Center for Photography has been at the heart of Houston's thriving arts community and looks forward to an expansive future.



Architectural plan, courtesy of Henry Gendel, Gendel Architects

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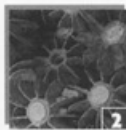
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Compiled by **Fabiola Valencia**

Allison Hunter joins SPOT

SPOT welcomes Allison Hunter as the new editor of this award-winning publication. A New Jersey native, Hunter lived in Lausanne, Paris, and New York before moving to Houston in August of 2003. She is a professional visual artist, art journalist, and web designer. As an interdisciplinary artist, Hunter engages contemporary art forms (video, sound design, public art, photography) with writing. She has exhibited internationally and has participated in art residencies from Canada to Russia. Recent articles have appeared in *Sculpture*, *HOW*, and *ebr* (electronicbookreview.com).

Hunter studied visual art at Maryland Institute College of Art, the Ecole Cantonale d'art de Lausanne (Switzerland) and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (M.F.A. 1997). Her work is in the collections of Europos Parkas (Lithuania), the Open-Air Art Museum at Pedvale (Latvia), the Pirkkala Sculpture Park (Finland), the University at Albany Art Museum, the Albany Institute of History and Art, and the Center for Photography at Woodstock, New York.



The tail-fins of mortar rounds collected together at the B.A.C. De-mining Centre, Kabul, 2001–2002

that contains a graveyard flanked by a mammoth burnt-out open-air bus depot in the foreground, a roofless suburb in the middle ground, and scattered pockets of inhabited houses backing on the sere hills at the rear of the picture.

There is an intentional sense of layering in many of the pictures in the series.

occupation and withdrawal, the subsequent infighting between rival warlords, capped off by the Taliban and the intensive bombing and ground campaign by America and Britain, has left both land and the people distinctively scarred. The very ground under one's feet is uncertain because of the millions of land mines deployed over the last two decades.

At one time, Afghanistan was seen as a development model for central Asia. In the 1960s, the nation boasted thriving cities, a stable food supply, a well-developed system of higher education, and a developing female professional class. Now, the simplest and most basic

arms, mortar fire, incendiaries, "smart" bombs, and cluster bombs, used alone or in combination. Then there is the coded labeling developed by de-mining teams that tips off passersby to the mined, cleared, or unknown safety status of a given locale: truly, a difficult world to survive, much less photograph.

Afghanistan, the book, is an impressive effort, well designed and plain-spoken. But the exhibition is actually far more eloquent, thanks to the quality of Norfolk's prints. The photographs are printed 20x24 and 30x40 inches, from 4x5 color negatives. The clarity of detail, color, and composition and the generous proportions help melt our resistance to the subject matter without being so large as to overwhelm. These human-scaled photographs are beautiful, and we can't help but enter into them as landscapes, at least to some degree.

There is an unfortunate side effect to Norfolk's view-camera approach, however, which is the absence of the Afghans as individual people. This omission is perhaps inevitable given Norfolk's stated aims, but it does tend to limit our ability to connect with the inhabitants. Norfolk mentions various colonial photographers (such as Francis Frith) and makes use of their native-as-scaling-device ironically in some images. One wishes Norfolk's Walker Evans had been accompanied by a 21st century James Agee so that the ruined landscape could be better connected to the thoughts and feelings of the people who have lived through such times.

As it turns out, we need all the help we can get. Afghanistan is a country that has been twisted into a shape we can hardly recognize. The book jacket shows the concrete skeleton of a bombed-out hexagonal teahouse, part of a Soviet-built pavilion of social progress in Kabul. There is a lovely desert sunset. Off to one side stands a balloon seller. His cluster of helium-filled balloons is the brightest color in the picture. Balloons were tremendously popular after the fall of the Taliban because they were banned under the fundamentalists. But after the initial euphoria, the supply gave out; and, according to Norfolk, balloons have now all but disappeared from Afghanistan.

PHIL HARRIS is a PHOTOGRAPHER, WRITER, AND EDUCATOR BASED IN PORTLAND, OREGON.



The mausoleum of the dead king, Nadir Shah (d. 1793), Shahi Shaheed district, Kabul, 2001–2002

of war to a contemporary audience that sees all images as essentially equal and equally consumable as entertainment.

Norfolk's idea is, in a sense, to preempt the inevitable aestheticizing of his work: to beat the viewer to the punch. His pictures of the ruins of Kabul are carefully crafted spectacles of sun, sky, and rubble. Their pastel palette ranges through the delicate desert umbers and ochres of Richard Misrach's *Bravo Twenty*, *The Bombing of the American West* (Johns Hopkins, 1990) project.

Norfolk gives us piles of mortar shell stabilizers that resemble close-ups of coral; a tank tread posed in the saffron dust like a twisted dinosaur spine; contrails of American B-52s tracing chalk lines across a purple desert-spa-advertisement twilight; a single layered frame

Norfolk refers to an "archeology of destruction" in Kabul and the surrounding countryside, an effect for which he coined the word "chronotopia." The layering of ruins and the artifacts of war makes the country a sort of "Museum of the Archeology of War." As Norfolk points out, the region has been an imperial prize since the ancient Greeks conquered and colonized it under Alexander. Foreigners (the Persians, Genghis Khan, the Ottomans, the British, the Soviets) have felt compelled to dominate the area for strategic reasons, and the evidence of each conqueror's influence is still apparent.

But the 1979 invasion by the Soviet Union began a wholly new chapter in Afghanistan's misery. Norfolk points out that the period marked by the Soviet

amenities and necessities are simply unavailable (think of those burnt-out buses, the entire transit fleet for the city of Kabul destroyed in one night by a suburban fight for supremacy between warlords). The distribution of food, water, and electricity (not to mention the educational system) remains precarious or nonexistent outside the capital city of Kabul. If Norfolk's pictures tell us nothing else, they point out the plain truth: how easy it is to destroy what costs such laborious patience to build.

The archeology of war can be parsed to a very fine degree: Norfolk's translator, if asked, could name the factions responsible for the destruction of any given building in Kabul as well as exact dates. Norfolk himself learned to recognize the signature detritus of small

AFGHANISTAN: CHRONOTOPIA
SIMON NORFOLK
DEWI LEWIS, 2003

PHIL HARRIS

Disgusted by the "antiseptic" media coverage of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan in 2001, British photographer Simon Norfolk decided to take matters into his own hands. He approached several insurance companies about travel coverage; but after learning that he would pay roughly ten thousand pounds a day for life insurance, Norfolk elected to do without. Having made out his will, he flew into Karachi and simply bribed his way across the porous border into Afghanistan. As he says, "If you have money, everything is easy, or at least possible." And so in December 2001, he crossed the Khyber Pass with a translator/guide, a wad of dollars hidden in his shoe, a wooden 4x5 inch field camera, and a single lens, to see for himself.

Norfolk, a London-based magazine and commercial photographer, wound up making two trips to Afghanistan, the first toward the end of the bombing campaign; the second a few months later, in May 2002. The resulting photographs have been published as a book (winner of the 2002 European Publishers Award for Photography) and are now traveling the United States as an exhibition.

Afghanistan is something of a departure for Norfolk. His previous book/exhibition, *For Most Of It I Have No Words: Genocide, Landscape, Memory* (Dewi Lewis, 1998), was a document of the sites of both recent and historical genocide. The 1998 images had a haunted feel, but the overall ambience was similar to both Michael Kenna's *Impossible to Forget: The Nazi Camps Fifty Years After* (Nazraeli, 2001) and Joel Sternfeld's *On This Site: Landscape In Memoriam* (Chronicle, 1996). Sternfeld took a view camera to the scenes of famous American crimes years after the crimes had been committed and came back with meticulously beautiful images—beautifully lit, beautifully composed pictures of the residue of despair and disaster. *For Most Of It I Have No Words* is similar in feeling, and to some degree, in aim.

The color work in *Afghanistan* is at once more distanced and closer to the bone than the (monochrome) *For Most Of It I Have No Words*. The distance, paradoxically, is a factor of the photographer's wish to humanize his subject. In our time, for war photographs to reach us emotionally, they must feel true and convincing without the sense that we are being pushed to take sides. Suffering



Former teahouse in a park next to the Afghan Exhibition of Economic and Social Achievements in the Shah Shahid district of Kabul, 2001–2002

AFGHANISTAN REVEALED

EDITOR'S NOTE:

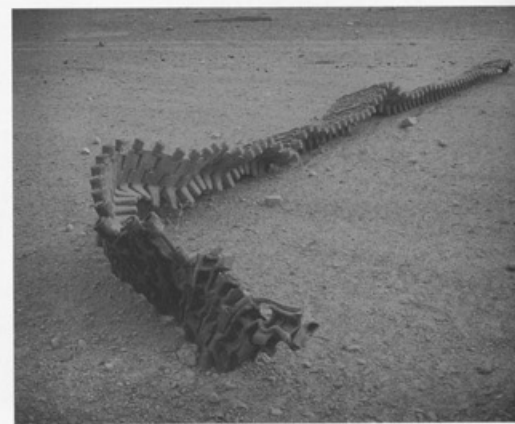
THIS PUBLICATION WAS PRODUCED IN CONJUNCTION WITH AN INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION THAT TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY THROUGHOUT THE U.K., EUROPE, AND IN THE U.S. AT VENUES SUCH AS FOTOFEST, HOUSTON, BLUE STAR CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, SAN ANTONIO, PARTS GALLERY, MINNEAPOLIS, AND THE GRIFFIN CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY, BOSTON.

must be described in a steady, calm voice for us to admit it into our hearts. This, Norfolk achieves, at least to some degree. Without pointing fingers, his pictures quietly evoke compassion. The photographer bears witness to the killing and bruising of the land and its people, illuminating a world brutally, repeatedly turned inside out. We are left with facts but no answers.

According to Norfolk, the challenge he set for himself was to make aesthetically pleasing photographs of the aftermath of war. He's certainly not the first photographer to try this. In fact, Norfolk cites Roger Fenton's Crimean War photography as a particular inspiration. The key Fenton photograph is *The Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855). An anonymous overcast, dusty road is pictured, but the road is choked with hundreds of

cannonballs, the aftermath of a sustained artillery barrage. In Fenton's day, it was impossible to document scenes of battle because of the slow, cumbersome technology of the time; so the photographer had to resort to a narrative built around the aftermath, which of necessity engaged the viewer's imagination.

Closer to our own time, images by Robert Capa, Lee Miller, W. Eugene Smith, Larry Burrows, Gilles Peress, and others, have captured the effects of war. Of course, many of these photographers would have denied that they beautified war; but as their pictures have reentered the world as art objects and historical artifacts, their original meanings have changed. Today, we can look at images



Track of destroyed Taliban tank at Farm Hada military base near Jalalabad, 2001–2002

of a dead, drowned SS guard (Miller); a grizzled, sweaty GI in the South Pacific sucking water from his canteen in close-up (Smith); or a Loyalist soldier in the Spanish Civil War at the moment of his (supposed?) death (Capa) with the sort of detachment that we bring to Timothy O'Sullivan's American Civil War battlefields. These are now splendid snapshots from history's unending stream, shorn of sounds and smells. The question is how to bring the reality

**"Everything's got a moral,
if only you can find it."**

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

DREAMING IN PICTURES

The Photography of Lewis Carroll



Lewis Carroll, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (self-portrait), May, 1875



Lewis Carroll, Xie Kichin, c. 1875



Lewis Carroll, Xie Kichin (in Greek dress), June 12, 1875

EDITOR'S NOTE:

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DOUGLAS R. NICKEL
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN
ART AND YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002

ROY FLUKINGER

It has been only a little more than half a century since Helmut Gernsheim rediscovered the photographs of the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson and brought them back into modern consciousness with his epic book, *Lewis Carroll, Photographer*. Despite the incongruity of the title—for Dodgson reserved his pen name solely for his writing—Gernsheim's book celebrated the Victorian's little known photographic imagery and gained headlines and sales in a fashion that none of the photohistorian's previous books had accomplished. And, although Gernsheim would come to

characterize this biography to Dodgson's elderly niece as being "as dry & pedantic as Lewis Carroll's life," the book would endure and present a new and very important aspect to Dodgson's life story.

Yet simultaneously, this same biography would also serve to distort the true artistry of the subject it sought to honor. Gernsheim's feat of rediscovery and telling was remarkably important—but his critical eye and modernist education would also relegate Dodgson and, indeed, the art of this age, to a limited



Lewis Carroll, Brook and Hugh Kichin, July 5, 1876

viewpoint which has tended to overwhelm the photographer's natural talent and unique vision. For all the good he would do, Gernsheim also consigned the Dodgson imagery to one of two categories—portraiture of children or celebrity documentation—while describing the particular styles of this era as “imitating Victorian painting.”

In addition, by leaving Dodgson's photographs of angelic pre-pubescent and sleeping or reclining young girls with no better artistic context, the biographer also left the artistry of this retiring, bachelor clergyman wide open to the eventual moral reactions and prurient fascinations of our own modern times. Thus, with the rise of interest in historical photography and Victorian studies in the 1970s and 1980s came an almost annual avalanche of inadequate texts and self-aggrandizing essays—chiefly illustrated with naively selected and poorly reproduced photographs—to accuse the poor Reverend of everything from bad taste to pedophilia. That the resulting analyses reveal more about the inadequacies of their authors rather than their subject has done little to salvage Dodgson's reputation. Rather, it has taken only the last decade or so and the refreshing and thoughtful perspectives of deliberate scholars like Roger Taylor, Edward Wakeling and now, Douglas Nickel, to reverse these idle speculations in the refreshing light of new research, exhibition, and practical thought.

The Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson—Oxford don, teacher of mathematics at Christ Church, logician, and noted author under his famous *nom de plume* of Lewis Carroll—began his fascination with photography in 1855 while in his early twenties. And a true fascination it was; Tennyson was correct when he surmised that the youthful clergyman “must dream in photographs.” For nearly 25 years Dodgson would pursue the medium—thoroughly, practically, and passionately—and it would ultimately shape much of his adult life and character. Indeed, it figures far more frequently in his diaries that all the entries under writing and it would become far more than the “hobby” (as Gernsheim characterized it) of a bookish scholar. Photography for Dodgson became a declaration of his moral and emotional convictions and, in a large number of his most memorable photographs, also a vibrant

expression of the soul of this artist and his times.

To reveal this complex and rewarding story, Doug Nickel has squared his shoulders, done his research, selected 76 photographs from many collections worldwide, and presented us with both a major traveling show and a beautifully designed catalogue which adds a fullness of dimension and heart to this much misinterpreted photographer. Like Taylor and Wakeling before him, Nickel is capable of understanding the personal and cultural complexities of Dodgson, as well as the drive that photography would

naturalism and deploy accoutrements such as titles to make more or less explicit references to the spiritual residing within the corporeal.”

Of the five original Dodgson albums, which we are fortunate to house in the Gernsheim collection at the Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, four contain the photographer's superb prints of family and friends, of little children and adult acquaintances. The fifth album, however, bears the cover title of *Professional and Other Photographs* and, as its title implies, is a remarkable assemblage of the works of other



Lewis Carroll, Irene MacDonald at Elm Lodge, July, 1863

have in illuminating his soul. In addition, however, he also brings to bear a critical overview of the often-missing context of the intricate but frequently misunderstood art history of the Victorian Era.

Nickel presents a convincing argument for our need to adopt a deeper understanding of the Victorian sensibilities and observations prevalent during that age. He points out that the audiences “in Dodgson's day could accept the simultaneity of the objective and the subjective in a photograph because they accepted it in life.” Thus, Dodgson's intent to costume his child subjects in a variety of “adult” roles—Ethel Hatch as a Turk, Xie Kitchin as a Chinese, Mary Jackson as Rosamond Clifford, the famous portrait of Alice Liddell as a beggar-maid—all owe much more to the tableau vivant traditions in British drama and society rather than to some psycho-sexual role-playing. For Dodgson—and, indeed, his potential viewers as well—the photograph's requirements were “to negotiate [the medium's]

photographers and artists whom Dodgson himself accumulated. A thoughtful journey through its pages does reveal works by a few Victorians with whom Dodgson has been associated in any number of traditional art histories—Lady Hawarden, O.G. Rejlander, and Julia Margaret Cameron—but it also shows the photographer's proclivity for the work of commercial portraitists like Herbert Watkins and Maull & Polyblank, as well as photocopies of a painting by Millais or engravings by various unnamed artists. Above all, it attests to the variety of artistic influences that attracted, moved, and shaped his vision. It is the collection of a sharp Victorian mind and eye, moved equally by a moral sensibility and a discerning view of his world.

It is a world that Nickel clarifies in word and image so very, very well. He conducts us through many more of the elemental factors—theatre, costume, the dream life, logic, mathematics, even chess—to explain the tastes and mindset of Victorian society. In addition, he

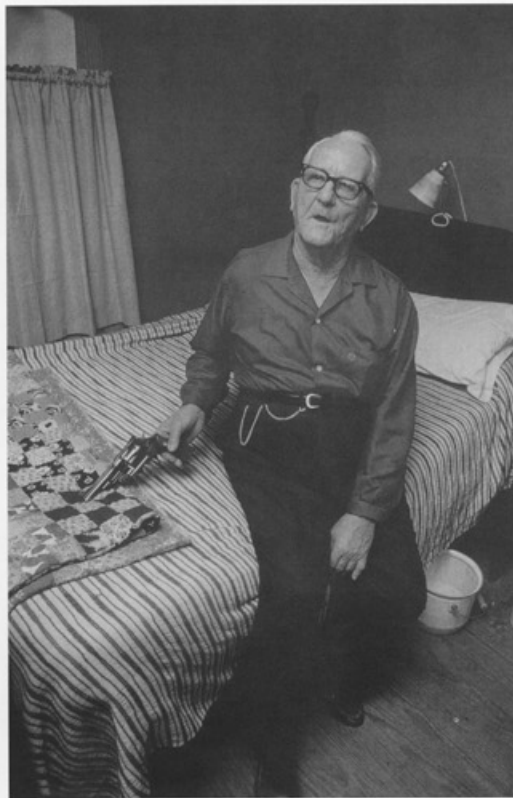
includes the best explanation I have read of the “cult of the child” from that era, distinguishing between the implied naturalness of childhood in opposition to the moral complications of the adult world. He warns us well about how photography's “factual” documentary qualities are not meant to be viewed or interpreted as literal depictions of any Victorian child. In doing so, he refutes well and completely everyone from the tearoom moralists of the Edwardian Age to contemporaries like Vladimir Nabokov who spoke recklessly about Dodgson's “perversion” and of his subjects as “participating in some dusty and dreadful charade.” It is a revealing essay which sobers us to how potent the photograph can be in revealing truths about ourselves, the viewers, as well as about the artists and subjects. In the end, this is not a surprising talent to find in Dodgson the photographer, especially when one considers the same universalities existed in the works of Lewis Carroll the author.

Years ago, a dealer came through the Ransom Center's Photography Department wanting to examine every Dodgson photograph. The staff reported that he sped through the 250+ prints very rapidly and when he asked to see me in private, I suspected what was up. Sure enough, he pulled out a sad little nineteenth century albumen print of two young girls engaged in what he charmingly called a “pornographic pastime” and wanted to know if I could verify if the sitters or any other elements could prove it might be by Dodgson. It was one of the few times we were happy to send someone away disappointed. For the dealer, like so many others before him, revealed in the end how little he knew about Dodgson. Even more so, however, he had let the Reverend Dodgson reveal once more how little someone knew about himself.

ROY FLUKINGER IS SENIOR CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM AT THE HARRY RANSOM HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN.



Robert Frank, *Cafeteria*, San Francisco, 1955–56



William Eggleston, *Morton, Mississippi*, 1974 (original in color)

Realist Traditions at the Tate

“The corps(e) of the Real—if there is any—has not been recovered, is nowhere to be found.”

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *THE VITAL ILLUSION*

CRUEL AND TENDER: THE REAL IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPH
TATE MODERN, LONDON
JUNE 5–SEPTEMBER 7, 2003
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CATALOGUE (TATE PUBLISHING, 2003)

JENNIFER ELKINS

Photography, existing on the borderline between document and art, continues to recreate itself as a visual medium in an evolving harmony with the psyche of contemporary culture, acting both as a conduit for social awareness and a catalyst of emotional response. As such, the medium places itself in the position of mirroring the cultural evolution of the notion of “the real.” It is in this context that the Tate Modern and Museum Ludwig collaborated to acknowledge photography as a major component of contemporary visual culture. This decision signals a shift in Tate policy toward photography as an art form. *Cruel and Tender: The Real in the Twentieth Century Photograph* is an ambitious, though in some ways limited, endeavor, to present an exhibition focused on the realist tradition in twentieth century photography. Director of the Tate, Nicholas

Serota, concedes in the exhibit catalogue that this was a momentous decision by the Tate that moves the museum toward an overall review of the future of the collecting and exhibiting of photography, both contemporary and historical.

Cruel and Tender examines a form of photography which focuses on the realist tradition and thus stresses pure description and confronts the Tate with a challenge to its philosophical imperatives.

Serota explains that “the elusive and documentary qualities in straight or descriptive photography challenge the traditions of the institution by concentrating on a form of photography which explores the intrinsic aspects of the medium.” His comment refers to the Museum’s commitment to a high modernist project which assumes that realism is outside of these parameters, and subsequently raises the question of the place of documentary photography in art. The curators, Emma Dexter and Thomas Weski, address this in their introduction to the catalogue, “in the art of record, the subtle ambiguities of truth and fiction, real and fake are continually kept in play one against another. ... *Cruel and Tender* provides an opportunity to explore the historical antecedents of that fascination with ‘the real’ which is so symptomatic of contemporary existence.”

Indeed, these “subtle ambiguities” have been the cornerstone of photography’s contemplation of “the real” in the twentieth century. Yet the viewer of the twenty-first century will experience this ambiguity differently as their perception and experience continues to evolve toward an alternative understanding of this concept. The generation of the hyper-real knows that reality is a relative term in a digital and virtual world. For, at the conceptual core of photography, the capturing of the “real” moment was, if not the ultimate goal of the invention, at least the presumed function. Freezing a moment in time and space enabled humans to hold in their hand a reproduction of an authentic expression of a reality. A replication of the real can only be an allusion to reality. Out of its fear of losing its identity, has photography



Diane Arbus, *A Jewish Giant at home with his parents in the Bronx, NY*, 1970



August Sander, *Children Born Blind*, c. 1930

created its own self-fulfilling prophecy of becoming the ultimate tool for the creation of a virtual reality, producing fossils of time and space, thus calling into question its very nature as it confronts its own authenticity in its claim to be the medium through which reality is validated?

Cruel and Tender suggests that one possible answer to this question is in a deconstruction of the definition of documentary photography, relating the experience of veracity and truth to the emotional response it generates in the viewer. Striving to establish a twenty-first century sensibility congruent with a contemporary psychological experience of "the real," the images define themselves as "real" based on the authenticity of the subjective response. Or as Dexter

reality of the existential struggle for survival and the tenderness being the care taken in documenting the vulnerability underlying the strength of those choosing to survive despite the inevitabilities of life.

The curatorial decisions involved were immense because of the scope of the endeavor. With Walker Evans and August Sander as the "bi-polar anchors" for the subjects explored, an axis of 23 of the most highly acclaimed American and German image makers of the past century were chosen. All explore the "documentary style," Walker Evans' term for the concept of realism in photography. Each image pushes the theory of descriptive photography as art to its inevitable end, the creation of an inter-subjective space, an exchange or dialogue between

American photographers primarily because of his plain uninflected style, harsh frontality, and aggressively ordinary subject matter that provide impetus for many other bodies of work. Likewise, Sander was the obvious choice as the German counterpart for his "photographic editing of society," as "a clinical process," like that of the cultural anthropologist creating a cumulative and comparative methodology, providing a distinctive and dispassionate visual language for generations of photographers. With these two photographers as the tension points, the exhibition employs a wide variety of photographs within the spectrum, each inspired directly or indirectly by the works of these two men.

Each photographer demands from the viewer a more than cursory glimpse

and leave us with the task of coming up with the answers."

There are, of course, in the realm of art, as in the experience of life, very few "correct" answers. The photographer's desire is not for the viewer to have the answer, but to ask the questions, and in the questions, to experience the dialogue that in the end should leave the viewer knowing that the quality of that experience remains in the questions left unanswered and the feelings aroused as a result. The art is in the mystery of the unanswerable question and the experience of "the real" lies in the emotions evoked in the tension of the unanswerable.

These unanswerable questions posed by the photographs in *Cruel and Tender* refer most specifically to the notion of



Walker Evans, *Houses and Billboards in Atlanta*, 1936



Robert Adams, from *What We Bought: The New World (Scenes From the Denver Metropolitan Area)* 1970-74

explains, "by concentrating on 'the real,' the photography in *Cruel and Tender* opposes itself to any idealizing tendency; a tendency that contains a range of inflections and trajectories from romanticism and sentimentality to redemptive qualities such as humor or pathos."

Dexter's comment on "the real" explains the limits of the exhibition as it assumes that a photograph must somehow be redemptive in order to capture "the real" and that some responses are more valid than others simply because they seem nobler when in fact sentimentality and romanticism do not necessarily negate the presence of "the real." They only connote superficiality and thus remove themselves from the modernist construct of what it means to be "real." However, it is through this critical construct that the exhibit takes its title from a quote by Lincoln Kirstein describing Walker Evans' depiction of the American vernacular as a "tender cruelty," the cruelty being the objective

the subjective realities of viewed and viewer so that in the end the "real" moment is manifested not in the objective representation, but in the subjective space of dialogue and in the feelings provoked as a result of this communication.

This communication changes over time as the subjective response to the photo is influenced by the elements of contemporary culture and the emotional reaction elicited in relationship to changing influences and ideologies. As Evans wrote, "The element of time entering into photography provides a departure for as much speculation as an observer cares to make." It is in this speculation that the viewer is free to project on to the image his/her perceptions of reality and that projection will change over time both on a collective level and on a personal level, thus creating unique subjective perceptions of reality or notions of "the real."

The curators chose the work of Evans as a jumping off point for the

at the subjects in their works. Whether it be the face of one of the Somali refugees by Fazal Sheikh, from his series *A Camel for the Son*, or the structures of industrial architecture by Bernd and Hilla Becher; each conveys the potential dialogue. The seemingly dispassionate documentary subject matter elicits from the viewer an unimpassioned response with an unsettling puzzlement. For, each image seems to convey a ubiquitous message, "There are multiple layers of meaning in this image," and asks a referential question, "What does this photograph signify?"

In his review of the exhibit for *Tate Magazine*, Carter Ratcliff addresses this phenomenon of the dialogue as he attempts to discern what makes a documentary photograph a work of art. "The pictures count as works of art not because they make matters clear. They count as art because, in spite of their accuracy, they do nothing of the kind. They call their subjects into question

"the real" as it relates to the social and political anxieties of twentieth-century existence. The images rely on the layering of social and political symbols which frame the meaning of "the real" as an existential experience of life as it is lived in relationship to the culture. The inevitable narrative created as a result of the transforming power inherent in the symbol, in turn, provokes the psychological response thereby creating the experience of "the real." The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, addresses this phenomena as he explains that "the real" is reality in its unmediated form. It is what disrupts the subject's perceived notions about oneself and the world. It then characteristically appears to the subject as a shattering enigma, because in order to make sense of it one must symbolize it to ensure its control.

The work of Diane Arbus and Robert Adams depicts the significance of the symbolic in its most explicit

construction. Arbus' images, juxtaposing the symbols of the "normal" and the "abnormal" in a playful perversity, plunge the viewer into a sea of disbelief, paradoxically creating a simultaneous desire to believe. As she describes this dilemma, she reflects on her own destiny. "I think I must have been brought up to be a sort of magic mirror who reflects what anyone wants to believe because I can't believe they believe it, like Atlas holding up a bubble and groaning." Arbus' *The Jewish Giant* depicts a family in a traditional middle-class living room filled with the accoutrements of the "normal" American home. The family is, however, anything but normal. As the tiny Jewish mother gazes up in disbelief at her eight-foot tall son with a look of horror and disbelief on her face, the father observes. The viewer cannot know if this is "real" but senses that underlying all the symbols of normality there exists the possibility of the anomaly, which in that moment transforms one's notions of reality. The "real" then becomes the feelings generated in the viewer by the anomaly, the desire to allow it to transform through belief, to know what is "real" so as to relieve the latent anxiety of uncertainty. For the underlying fear is the human vulnerability of being tricked, seduced by a decoy, and in the end, duped into believing that a social structure which appears as normal, promising security, is in fact abnormal and precarious.

Frank's symbolic use of the icons of American culture elicits the questions differently. The viewer believes the image but desires more narrative and must create meaning through an extrapolation of the symbolic references. Whether it is the flag, a jukebox, the top hats, a trolley, a cafeteria, or an automobile, the image revolves around the central symbol. The "real" in Frank's work is experienced through the subjective response and psychological feeling evoked by the symbolic reference. The self-awareness of the subjects in the photographs becomes palpable in the context of the symbols of community and forces the viewer to feel the fear of isolation intrinsic to the experience of being human. The images convey the potential for chaos as the symbol provides the only sense of equilibrium and possible security. These symbols give the superficial assurance that all is in order, but the emotional response sends another message; beneath the known lays the unknowable where one is faced with the possibility of an unbearable isolation.

This underlying potential for chaos is vividly depicted in a different manner in the works of both William Eggleston and Robert Adams. Influenced by a Faulknerian narrative, Eggleston sees his pictures as part of a novel he is writing. He uses his hyper-real depictions of inanimate objects and troubling emotionless facial expressions to convey the sense that beneath the artificial security of the mundane; a volatile core exists which is capable of a violent eruption and potential destruction. Every scene is staged and each photograph seems devoid of spontaneity, functioning as

Adams' series, *What We Bought: The New World*, explores this theme through the recording of the people, culture, industry, and environment of the Denver suburbs. Shot in black-and-white, the images portray a world of stark extremes: the contrast between the beauty of the natural environment and the frightening human exploitation of its resources. The catalogue offers a brief comment on the genesis of this body of work in Adams' own words. He explains, "The pictures record what we purchased, what we paid, and what we could not buy. They document a separation from

Each photograph on view speaks to the dissolution of a dream and the resulting loss of all that seemed to matter as each confronts the notion of "the real" relating it to society's incapacity to understand the nature of human desire and its denial of the depth of human vulnerability. These images depict this denial that forces humanity to concretize its needs regardless of the cost, paying too high a price for what we cannot buy and sacrificing the passion for the illusion of security.

In the end, *Cruel and Tender* reminds the viewer that the photograph as object is real, but that the experience of the real has little to do with the subject matter's claim of being so, and as such may have no bearing on an objective reality. In a modern notion of the world, "the real" was the viewer's perception of reality and that was trusted for the most part; but in a world that is more real than real, hyper-real, that is no longer the case. More real than real is the fake or the illusion. In confronting the question of what it means to be real and forcing the viewer into dialogue, the exhibition proposes that "the real" is the emotional response generated in this conversation. In this space, as the two subjective realities engage, the real becomes the fantasy and the fantasy becomes the real; the perceptions based on assumptions and presuppositions are forced to undergo a radical metamorphosis. The anxieties produced through this destabilization expose what might be called one's truth or encounter with the real.

As a result of this phenomenon, this exhibition might well have been titled *The Evolution of the Real in Twentieth Century Photography*. For, it was the twentieth century that deconstructed through science, technology, philosophy, and psychology the concept of "the real." Photography, as much as any other art form, was complicit in this revolution. The twentieth century created our digitalized and virtualized world wherein "the real" became only a projection of a possible reality and the viewer was left knowing that the only authentic experience of "the real" is in the emotional response one is forced to confront as a result of a heightened awareness of the true nature of humanity: a humanity cursed with a desire for meaning and passion, resulting in a profound consciousness of the extreme vulnerability produced by life as it is lived in the wake of the "tender cruelties" of life.

JENNIFER ELKINS IS A PSYCHOTHERAPIST IN PRIVATE PRACTICE LIVING IN HOUSTON, TEXAS. HER INTERESTS INCLUDE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY AND ART CRITICISM.



Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Water Tower, Verviers, Belgium*, 1983

staged confrontations between the subject and the photographer. For instance, this is depicted in his photograph of the elderly man sitting on a single bed, very well-dressed in slacks, shirt, dress shoes, and pocket watch, holding a revolver as he looks into the camera, aware of the photographer's presence. Is he merely showing the gun to someone or is he potentially contemplating suicide? This image provokes one's deepest fears of aging as it confronts the fact that the loss has already occurred and that the image is posthumous. The "real" is the experience of the fear and the anxiety produced, knowing that, as social animals, death bequeaths the ultimate confrontation with reality.

ourselves, and in turn, from the natural world that we professed to love." Do these images portend the Columbine tragedy and the reality of the potential dissolution of the American dream? Philosopher and social critic, Slavoj Žižek, describes this same idea as "a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality in the late capitalist consumerist society, 'real social life' itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbors behaving in real life as stage actors and extras. ... Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian de-spiritualized universe is the dematerialization of the "real life" itself, into its reversal, a spectral show."



Kim Manresa, Brazilian Child Prostitutes



Matt Heron, Bogalusa, LA, civil rights march: Deacons of Defense Segregationist and her daughters watch marchers in Bogalusa, Louisiana, 1976

FOTOFIESTA

MEDELLÍN 2003

MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA
SEPTEMBER 1-30, 2003

CAROLYN RICHARDS-HADDAD

FotoFiesta Medellín 2003 marks the first international biennial of photography held in Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín. *FotoFiesta* organizers, Juan Alberto Gaviria, Juan Luis Mejía, Paul Bardwell, and Alberto Sierra Maya succeeded in energizing the city and wowing its visitors with the help of an army of volunteers and an amazing sense of organization. Their efforts included hosting forty exhibitions, concurrent portfolio reviews, lectures, conferences, community workshops, and nightly slide projections/discussions.

FotoFiesta Medellín is based on Houston's FotoFest, the third oldest photographic festival in the world. FotoFest's popular Meeting Place program (a portfolio review where emerging photographers meet one-on-one with established decision-makers in the international photographic community) has been duplicated in photography festivals in Denmark, Argentina, and Slovakia. *FotoFiesta* incorporated a portfolio review inviting twenty international curators, photographers, and art critics from Argentina, Venezuela, El Salvador, Spain, South Africa, Holland, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

In recognition of the support of FotoFest, Wendy Watriss, FotoFest Artistic Director, was honored at the festival with much fanfare. She also gave a lecture on the 1997 publication, *Image and Memory: Photography from Latin America 1866-1994* (University of Texas Press), which she co-edited with Lois Parkinson-Zamora. Watriss, a long-time friend and collaborator with *FotoFiesta* directors, commented, "The organizers are people with exceptionally fine human values. They are doing this for all the right reasons—to help the artists and help the city open up to new opportunities."

Organizers of *Fotofiesta* have been asked numerous times to review portfolios at FotoFest's Meeting Place and have organized many exhibitions in Colombia

as a result of the contacts made in Houston. They have also worked on projects that showcased Colombian talent in the U.S. They thereby had a privileged understanding of the advantages to Colombian artists and the city by hosting a festival of this kind.

FotoFiesta also provided a unique opportunity to improve the country's negative international reputation for illegal drug trafficking and violence. An awareness of this issue influenced programming and exhibition choices in a subtle but very real way. There were a wide range of related social documentary issues from many countries that were addressed in the event programming.

Three exhibitions that spoke directly to the violence issue profiled examples of peaceful protests in Colombia, the United States, and India. Jesús Abad Colorado exhibited photographs of thousands marching against the violent tactics used in Colombian guerrilla warfare. These moving images included groups of wives and mothers whose sons have been casualties of the twenty-year conflict between terrorist organization, FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and government forces. Abad Colorado's black-and-white prints eloquently captured the fatigue citizens have experienced with the long conflict. Matt Heron's seminal 1960s photographs of the American civil rights movement (including Martin Luther King's impassioned speeches, children with protest signs being drug off by police) served as instructive icons of a painful period of the growth of the U.S. as a nation. Included also was a collective exhibition of photographs depicting the life of Mahatma Gandhi, curated by Peter Rüh of Germany.

Curator Katie Lyle produced an exhibition of archival photographs from the civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s. This same powerful exhibition was seen in Houston at FotoFest 1992. The implied message behind this exhibition's inclusion was perhaps an illustration by the programming committee that Colombia is not alone in its problems with civil war. Since El Salvador has resolved much of the conflict that ravaged that country, could the same resolution not be in store for Colombia?



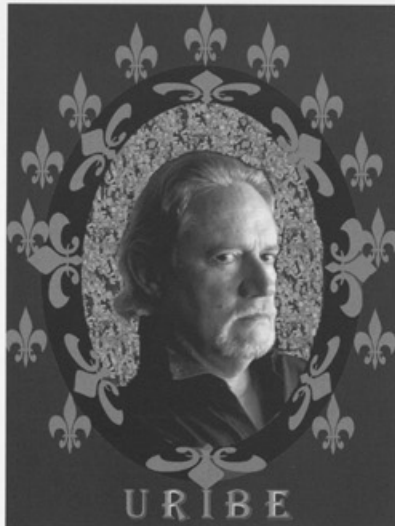
Maria Pilar Duque, *Untitled #2*, (original in color)



James Lerager, *The Chernobyl Sarcophagus*. The Chernobyl Sarcophagus, built with the labor of 600,000 people and originally intended to stand for decades, was already buckling and disintegrating within a few years after construction was completed in 1987. Now in danger of collapsing, it is to be superseded by a much larger structure—arching over the entire reactor building and original sarcophagus—to be constructed by an international consortium at a cost currently estimated at \$800 million. Inside the cracking building still contains large quantities of the reactor's radioactive materials. Robotic remote control and automated equipment, designed to monitor conditions inside the sarcophagus, has broken down under intense radiation.

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Donna de Cesare, who currently teaches photojournalism at the University of Texas at Austin, presented exceptional documentary-style photographs of gang members in El Salvador and New York. The power of her photos lies in their intimacy and the demonstrated clarity of the destructive nature of the subjects' conflicts. Following her work in New York, de Cesare photographed gang members in El Salvador who were devastated by alliances first forged in the U.S. De Cesare took many personal risks in order to highlight this social problem and to help people wishing to divest themselves of gang association.



Juan Camilo Uribe, *Autoretrato*, (original in color)

Other social-documentary photographers worth noting include Kim Manresa and Manuel García, both from Spain. Manresa exhibited high-impact images of child prostitutes in Brazil, refugee children in Bosnia, and African victims of female genital mutilation. García documented the Herculean efforts of volunteers in the clean-up of the devastation caused by the oil freighter sunk off the Spanish coast in 2002. While García is an admirably impassioned environmentalist and humanitarian who has brought international attention to a severe envi-

ronmental problem, his photographs lacked technical and aesthetic strength.

The *Centro Colombo Americano* has been a cultural center in Medellín for years, hosting exhibitions, performances, and academic programming. The most striking exhibition hosted there was a series of black-and-white documentary photos by American James Lerager. They were uninspiring as images but transformed into hair-raising tales of irresponsible handling of nuclear programs and waste worldwide with the powerful, (unfortunately English) explanatory text accompanying



Kati Troivanen, from the exhibition *Body Politic*, (original in color)

each photo. Along with other photo essays, he has worked on this project for twenty years with extraordinary dedication to informing the public of the dangers posed by mismanagement of this type of technology.

The grand *Museo de Antioquia*, the largest venue in Medellín, housed eleven of the festival's exhibitions, including *The Daguerrotype and the Origins of Photography*, curated by Juan Luis Mejía (General Director of *FotoFiesta*) and *Cromos: 87 Years of Photography*. *Cromos* magazine is a

general interest publication that showcases popular culture and politics, including profiles of Colombian musicians and actresses and behind-the-scenes looks at Colombian sports heroes. This provided a refreshing counterpoint to the morbid international fixation on the violent side of Colombian culture.

The Museum of Modern Art of Medellín housed an extensive exhibition of contemporary Colombian photography, curated by Miguel González, director of the Contemporary Art Museum in Cali, Colombia. This exhibition was,



Jesús Abad Colorado, from the exhibition *Resistance*



Donna de Cesare, *Esperanza*

for the most part, confusing. It could have benefited from explanatory text accompanying the complex conceptual works. For example, photographers Gloria Posada and Camilo Uribe later explained (in a portfolio review session) that their work addressed a very significant problem of villages being displaced by large dam projects. Surprisingly, one of Colombia's most well-known contemporary artists/photographers, Oscar Muñoz, was not well-represented in this exhibition. Selections of Patricia

Alvarez Bravo's photographs, large-scale depictions of two people engaged in romantic sex included larger than life-sized close-ups of vaginas, were also not representative of her best current work. Her exhibition grabbed headlines when it was removed from its original location, the interior of an insurance building.

By contrast, one standout exhibition from the U.S. was *Body Politic*. It successfully addressed feminist issues in photography. Curator Colette

Copeland (photography professor at the University of the Arts and University of Pennsylvania) selected mixed-media, installation, and film by women artists whose work addresses the female body as well as the role of women in society.

Two self-portrait exhibitions included in the festival could not have been more different. Juan Camilo Uribe, whose work was exhibited at Medellín's cutting-edge gallery, *La Oficina*, has been taking self-portraits in various media every day for years. He embellishes the prints with paint, stickers, and magazine cuttings (to name only a few of his sources) creating an outrageous assemblage referential to mythical or literary beings. The result is a wildly diverse, often hilarious collection of photos. For example, Uribe poses as Uncle Sam, Salvador Dalí, and the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. Jan van Leeuwen's exhibition at the EAFIT University consisted of a large-scale series of cyanotype head shots. Each shot documented excruciating details of the effects of lifting his chin or turning his head one millimeter at a time. In comparison to Uribe's work, van Leeuwen's seemed pompous and overly introverted.

The University of Medellín displayed Camilo Restrepo Z's photographs of photos left on tombstones in Colombian cemeteries. The torn and weathered snapshots, often mounted under glass, age and fade in ways un-related to the person depicted or to the actual corpses lying under them. Restrepo Z's carefully considered work has centered around the concept of identity for a number of years. This is the latest in a number of projects that probe the issue.

Argentina and Venezuela were represented by two large exhibitions. Buenos Aires artists, Jorge Ortiz, Juan Travník, Nacho Iasparra, and Eduardo Gil were luminous standouts in the Argentinian exhibition. *Photocity: The Urban Aesthetic and the Photographic Language*, a Venezuelan group exhibition, made less of an impact except for the inclusion of the remarkable cityscapes of Antolin Sanchez, who used artificial light in very emotionally evocative ways. At this same venue, Venezuelan artist Luis Lares had a solo exhibition of handsome, dignified portraits of workers in an industrial zone in Caracas.

Another exhibition of contemporary Colombian work was curated by Roberto Montoya, photography professor at the University of Antioquia. Montoya has promoted contemporary conceptual work in Medellín for years, arranging exhibitions and promotional opportunities for students and protégés. He

has a unique ability to inspire students (and former students) to produce thought-provoking work. This exhibition showcased up-and-coming talent such as that of Maria Pilar Duque. Montoya also facilitated non-official portfolio reviews with dazzling work.

The *FotoFiesta* portfolio reviews were fairly modest in scale but professionally run. The admission fee, roughly 45 dollars, would be considered high in local currency. The fee did not deter one woman who took an all-night bus from Bucaramanga and arrived breathless the morning of her review. She showed amateur photographs (her son in front of local monuments, her neighbor's kittens) with enormous sincerity and dedication to learn as much as she could about photography. Her enthusiasm left no doubt that she was going to implement every suggestion put forth to her. Of course, there were many much more sophisticated and accomplished photographers presenting their work. The local artists demonstrated an informed sensibility, and were well-aware of the art scene outside of Colombia. Their work compared favorably technically and aesthetically to their international counterparts.

FotoFiesta is indicative of a trend whereby emerging photographic festivals all over the world are now helping each other to build and share resources. This event was an extremely ambitious undertaking and succeeded in having a strong impact, not just on the citizens of Medellín, but on the many international visitors privileged to have been a part of it. As a result, many of the visitors plan to collaborate with artists and curators they met at the festival. The most remarkable aspect of the festival was the absolute dedication of the people who put it together and the professionalism of an event of this scale with limited resources. Using lessons learned in Houston, *FotoFiesta* succeeded in adding itself to a list of an ever-growing roster of important international photographic events. Event hosts are already carefully analyzing this year's festival as they look forward to an even more ambitious *FotoFiesta 2005*.

CAROLYN RICHARDS-HADDAD ATTENDED *FOTOFIESTA* AS ONE OF TWENTY CURATORS PARTICIPATING IN THE PORTFOLIO REVIEW PROGRAM. SHE IS AN INDEPENDENT CURATOR AND CRITIC WHO HAS WORKED AS EXHIBITIONS COORDINATOR AND FESTIVAL MANAGER FOR *FOTOFIESTA*.

BERTHA ALYCE: unBLOCKED

BERTHA ALYCE: MOTHER EXPOSED

GAY BLOCK

WITH ESSAYS BY KATHLEEN STEWART

HOWE AND EUGENIA PARRY

INCLUDES THE VIDEO, *BERTHA ALYCE*,

(RUNNING TIME 23:34) ON DVD

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS,

2003

PRODUCED IN CONJUNCTION WITH

THE EXHIBITION *BERTHA ALYCE: A*

PHOTOGRAPHIC BIOGRAPHY (UNIVERSITY
OF NEW MEXICO ART MUSEUM, 2003)

PETER BROWN

Editor's Note: This traveling exhibition will be at the Houston Center for Photography in conjunction with FotoFest 2004, March 12–April 25, 2004.

Although Gay Block's 30-year photographic career addresses a wide range of personal and political subjects, her life and work resolve in a surprising way in this memoir (and accompanying documentary film). Block is probably best known for a project she exhibited on Holocaust rescuers at the Museum of Modern Art in 1992. Yet, despite the outward direction of much of her work, she is on record as saying that each time that she takes a picture, the subject she confronts is her mother. And given the evidence gathered in this book, it seems to be the truth. If a direct connection is not apparent, then at least the specter of Bertha Alyce Shlenker seems to float in the background.

Bertha Alyce: Mother exposed is a velvet brick of a book—more like a novel in format (7 x 10 inches, 290 pages) than a photographic monograph. It shares as much with recent memoir (Alice Sebold, Mary Carr, Ian Frazier, etc.) as it does with contemporary photography; and it moves photography into narrative in new ways. It's an R-rated family album—beautiful and moving, creepy and incendiary.

The main focus of the book involves the complex relationship between Block and her mother, Bertha Alyce, who died in 1991. But this book is about many things—faith in tenacity, in storytelling, and in the truths that a camera can actually tell. It's about gilded cages, witchy mothers, and favored brothers. It's about princesses, princes, kings, queens, being Jewish, prominent, and wealthy in the South. It's about a mother, a daughter, and a private journey made public. It's about a battle defined at birth. It's about

a bone-deep desire to get at truths that are unquestionably sad and implausibly redemptive. And it's about the way that photography, video, words, and design can tell a complex story in a new way.

Shifts in color, time, and content introduce the reader to people in Bertha Alyce's life (including a general disclaimer by two of her best friends). We are shown photographs of mothers that Block would have preferred, and are given examples of Bertha Alyce's odd combination of self-centeredness and generosity. After introductions, the book moves quickly into a timeline that follows Block and her family from her grandparents' generation to her mother's death and beyond.

Bertha Alyce: Mother exposed concerns two smart women. Each is ambitious—and each uses all the tools she can lay her hands on to shape her life. One of them happens to be a remarkable photographer and writer, and the other never quite grew up—a narcissist's narcissist. It's as if Diane Arbus had gone inward and photographed the Nemerovs or as if she had been born into Lartigue's family, and the Lartigue family had been from Houston and overseen by a mother worthy of the oddest corners of Edward Albee's brain. Or something... It's quite a story.

Block tells us that her mother always wanted to be a Southern Belle, and came about as close to being one as a Jew might. Born Bertha Alyce Masur in Monroe, Louisiana, she was brought up rich by a father beloved in his town and a mother with problems. If not conventionally beautiful, she was striking, flirtatious, and charming. She loved men, and she loved their attention. After careful consideration, Bertha Alyce married Irvin Shlenker, a bright man whose financial prospects interested her more than his love (earlier she had been jilted by the man she did love). And it quickly becomes apparent that Bertha Alyce had no great use for children beyond a decoration of sorts for the idealized life that she imagined for herself. In her afterword, Eugenia Parry writes a brief but compelling psychological analysis of Bertha Alyce that examines her parents—particularly her mother, who had a nervous breakdown and was removed from the family home at a vulnerable time in Bertha Alyce's young life.

The Shlenkers moved to Houston



where Irvin became a banker and was quite successful. The couple ascended the social ladder and arrived at a place of apparent "royalty." They had two children, Sidney and Gay; ran their large home with hired help; attended important events; ultimately became philanthropists; and helped to shape the city. Sidney went on to run the Astrodome, own the Denver Nuggets, and build the Memphis Pyramid, among other things. Gay, after a rocky childhood, married; had two kids; began to photograph seriously; left her husband; recognized herself as lesbian; and eventually, with her partner, Malka Drucker, left town, first for Los Angeles and then for Santa Fe.

All photographs by Gay Block
Clockwise from top:
Bertha Alyce in her dressing room
Brownie snapshot of Bertha Alyce bathing (original in color)
Portrait of Bertha Alyce
Gay Block with Bertha Alyce's necklace (original in color)
One of the "Bubbies" (original in color)

From the portrait we are given, Bertha Alyce seems to have done just about whatever she wanted to do. Money was never scarce, nor were affairs, and the social scene was what mattered. Her life centered on men, parties, friends, fundraisers, and the Temple. It did *not* center on her children, particularly Gay, who was taught from an early age to think of herself as fat, ugly, and stupid.



The double whammy was that Sidney, her brother, could do no wrong.

Block's response was to pick up a camera, and use it as a means of self-protection and definition. And from the start, she had talent. Some of the early Brownie shots are reminiscent of, and as good as early Eggleston's. She had an innate eye for color, composition, time, and for implied story. And she had

found her subject matter. Her youthful snapshots captured the embarrassing things that no family would want acknowledged. Her later work reveals similar but more complex secrets involving the Houston Jewish community. At base, the photographs attempt a reconciliation with her mother, and Bertha Alyce, despite a narcissistic availability, was not a mother to make reconciliation easy.

Throughout the book, we see the evidence of Block's investigations, not only through the camera (in every conceivable format), but also through video, tape recordings, and interviews. And each form becomes another tool to help her understand where she, her mother, and her community have come from. Initially, her work seemed critically edged, and Block herself speaks of what she thought of as a superficiality in her community that she hated. But time and understanding have softened her response. For example, we are given a series of Block's photographs that compares her mother's jewelry with her own. Bertha Alyce collected expensive jewelry, jewelry that Block did not particularly like, but that she eventually inherited. Block also, it seems, has bought a lot of jewelry over the years, but of a very different sort. We see the two collections compared in page after page—photographs documenting two distinct styles of rings, earrings, bracelets, and the like. In a flash, Block seems to have found both a parallel and a difference in taste—along with a bittersweet recognition of the love that her mother gave to things—a love that might have gone elsewhere. The different lifestyles and a similar need for adornment is oddly innocent. Some shots include jewelry placed over frosted cakes, pies, and desserts—treats that Block consumed in the same comforting way, when she was a child. Ultimately, the care with which both sets are arranged seems filled with both love and regret.

This is, finally, a photography book; and it's packed: with black and white, color, studio shoots, family portraits, candid snapshots at parties, and so on. The photographs carry a resonance, seriousness, and comprehensiveness that at times is close to overwhelming. The imagery of family and the narratives these images imply spin off each page in jangled ways (made artful in part thanks to the art direction of Cynthia Madansky). The range includes: old family pictures, black-and-white shots of Houston, color photographs from Miami and elsewhere, arranged photographs of jewelry and furs, an astonishing number of nudes, a series on Bertha Alyce's face-lift, stills from films and video, and even a Duane Michaels/Jules Feiffer-like series on Block's relationship with Malka. Quite a mix—with a surprisingly easy flow, at once entertaining, salacious, and low-key.

Something should be said about the nudes, for which Bertha Alyce was all too happy to pose (and which, when they were first exhibited scandalized her

friends). This is not the stuff of normal family albums. Two quick examples: in the first, Gay and Bertha Alyce pose for Block's camera, naked to the waist, in what quite literally, is a comparative study of breasts. Bertha Alyce's comment is that she's sorry that Gay's breasts are not as pretty as hers. Another shocker comes from one of Block's dreams: in a close-up, we see a 6-karat diamond ring, that belonged to her mother, encircle a baby's penis. Gay Block has photographed nudes for decades, friends and strangers alike; it's interesting to consider the familial provenance of these photographs.

The two essays that follow Gay's work: a short appreciation and explanation of Gay's portraiture by Kathleen Stewart Howe and Eugenia Parry's lengthy ruminative psycho-historical essay, are well done, but ultimately unnecessary. *Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed* stands on its own. Good books don't need buttressing; and this one, as filled with words and explanation as it is, particularly doesn't. Parry's essay explores history that is not otherwise covered. Yet, it seems out of place in such a personal story, a story best told by Block herself.

After the bitterness, wistfulness, anger, and confusion conveyed in the book, *Bertha Alyce*, the video, gives us an oddly sympathetic impression of Block's mother. The even-handedness with which Bertha Alyce, the person, is approached gives the viewer a sense of trust in the evidence gathered in the book. There are no cheap shots. Granted, Bertha Alyce in most of the sessions is old; and some of the more self-reflective comments come after she has suffered a stroke. But she still comes across as struggling: a woman near the end of her life, trying with not a little confusion, to understand the ramifications of that life and her relationship with the daughter who questions her.

If there's hope here and new life, then so be it. Although we see and hear *Bertha Alyce: Mother exPosed* voyeuristically, all of us have had mothers and fathers; and each of us, in different ways, have navigated the lived pages of a similar family book. And in the end, we share Block's conflicted but enduring understanding of parental love. This book is a testament both to Gay Block's tenacity and to the tenacity of that love itself. One wonders, finally, if Block wants this story to end. Or if in fact it can. Where she goes next and the way that Bertha Alyce goes with her, seems to be the open question.

PETER BROWN IS A PHOTOGRAPHER FROM HOUSTON. HIS BOOKS ARE *SEASONS OF LIGHT* AND *ON THE PLAINS*. HE HAS PHOTOGRAPHED HIS FAMILY FOR MANY YEARS.

TRAVELS WITH DIANA

A VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHER GOES GLOBAL

JEROME CROWDER

In the Fall of 2001, I prepared for a journey unlike any other I have made or will probably make again. As an anthropology professor, I was enlisted to participate in a 100-day Semester at Sea, a program aboard a ship circumnavigating the world. With nearly 650 college students and 28 faculty members, we embarked on a complicated itinerary including China, Viet Nam, Malaysia, India, Turkey, and Morocco.

Before leaving Houston for Vancouver (the disembarkation port), I pondered how much time I would have for ethnographic photography while on shore, exploring each country for about a week. The photographers and enthusiasts gravitated towards each other and began a voyage-long discussion on composition, techniques, digital versus traditional film, printing, paper, and display. Jim Burke, from the University of Pittsburgh, taught a photography class on-board the ship. He also shared his vast skill and broad knowledge with anyone who asked; and with a few of us, he revealed his loves: vintage daguerreotypes and a plastic 120MM camera, the *Diana*.

September 11, 2001 found us in the Pacific Ocean, two days from Japan. We learned of the unbelievable events at 2:00 in the morning (our time) and immediately logged onto the CNN website via the limited satellite Internet connection. At the time, our ship seemed like the only place on earth that did not have a video feed; so we waited in line to read the printouts distributed throughout the ship and to contact our families via email. While we consoled each other, our shipboard leaders calculated a different course and confirmed a new itinerary—one that would change more than once. Our new route would take us from India to Kenya and down around the Cape of Africa, then to Brazil and Cuba before arriving in Miami. After two weeks at sea to Kobe, everyone was eager to disembark and call the States to verify that their loved ones were safe. The night before arriving in Kobe, Jim and I met in the faculty lounge for a beer. He pulled a blue-and-black plastic camera from an old canvas bag, and introduced me to Diana. "These were made in Hong Kong, around 1960 or so. Maybe we will find a few more when we get there..."

I was lost in my thoughts about Japan, New York City, my friends, and the world. I had no idea at the time that this strange plastic box would change my ideas about photography as much as 9/11 changed our course and our perceptions of the world we live in.

At that meeting, I realized we had been on the ship for two weeks, and I had only shot about one roll of transparency film. I was narrowly focused on photographing what I expected to see on land. Diana helped to change that perspective, with Jim's encouragement. "Just give her a chance. You'll see."

Held together by black masking tape and a few warts of plastic glue, Jim's Diana cameras had been modified in ways the clever manufacturers in Hong Kong could never have imagined. In the '60s, they shrewdly marketed the toy camera under more than thirty different names, ranging from Anny to Zodiac. Each has a single plastic lens, a fixed shutter speed (1/90 sec) and a sticky, three-stop aperture (for cloudy, partly-cloudy, and sunny day); the camera body leaks light like a sieve. At first, I dismissed the value of Diana's capabilities. I believed a camera was meant to take a sharp and properly exposed photograph. Diana changed all that. She challenged me to move beyond the assumptions of the tool and concentrate on the subjects in front of the lens.

In Hong Kong, Diana seemed quite at home. She framed the narrow streets with her equally narrow field of view, recording scenes with the subdued click of her fixed shutter. As we walked the markets and broad sidewalks, hiked the mountains, visited the islands, and crossed the bay, I was happy *not* to be using a 35MM camera after all. I felt freed from the constraints of focus



Jim Burke, Downtown Havana, Cuba, 2001



Jim Burke, Saigon, Viet Nam, market, 2001

and exposure. Instead, I concentrated on the giant Buddha, the bay shore, and the lives of the people in the New Territories.

From Hong Kong, we sailed to Saigon, Viet Nam (officially, Ho Chi Min City). Students and faculty alike immediately noticed the extreme

difference in our economic position and those of the people living along the banks of the Mekong Delta. By the time we were in Saigon, I had seen the results of Diana's capabilities. Her images were not typical travel photos. The edges of the images were curved and irregular,



Jerome Crowder, Indian Family, Chennai, India, 2001

images of all of those who had killed and been killed during the misanthropic years of communist rule. A large shrine (*stupa*) in the middle of the rice paddies commemorated the lives of the educated people and their families who had been a "threat" to Pol Pot's regime. More disgusting than the fragments of clothes and boxes of bones collected in the shrine was the realization that Cambodia had undergone this turmoil within *my* lifetime, while I had been in middle school. As we loaded ourselves onto the bus to depart, we asked ourselves how such a horrific, inhumane thing had occurred in our lifetime; no one had an adequate answer—we could only stare out the windows and watch the flooded fields and bobbing boats pass into our memories. Diana translated my bewilderment onto film; she captured blurry images of barbed wire fences, torture implements, and graves. The blurriness of her negatives mirrored our feelings about the situation.

By mid-October, we had passed through the Straits of Malacca and across the Indian Ocean to arrive in the east coast city of Chennai (Madras), India. People were everywhere, riding bicycles through the crowded streets, hanging out of packed busses, living on the sidewalks, while regularly praying in the ubiquitous Hindu temples. The crowded conditions were made worse by poor sewage and overburdened vehicles. My eyes took delight in the abundance of radiant colors from people's clothing while my nose struggled with the pungent odors of urine mixed with rotting fruit, mud, trash, and exhaust.

My students and I visited squatter settlements along the river running

though Chennai. As we wandered the streets, residents greeted us, inviting us into their homes to speak with us about their lives. Our cameras (still and video) didn't bother them, and I quickly realized that most of these folks knew of our visit ahead of time. No matter how hard I wanted to be something other than a tourist at the moment, I was a participant in the spectacle of poverty and caste. We were not as foreign to them as they were to us. As we boarded the buses,

our guides handed out two-kilo bags of rice to those families who had shown us the most hospitality. This "payback" caused many of our new "friends" to fight for the contents, and the plastic pouches spilled all over the ground. Although we met many interesting people along the streets in this settlement, the story I witnessed may not have been the story of the residents' everyday experience. My photographs from this visit were not any less real for me; they simply document the lives of people we were *supposed* to meet and observe. As tourists, we assumed that we would see slums; and although life in this part of town is drastic, what we experienced was planned to reify these sentiments. In the end, I reconciled my feelings about our visit through Diana's images, as they captured a disputed reality. Our hosts viewed us as resources and they as our objects. The purpose of understanding the humanity of the slums was overridden by the preconceived notions both of us held for the Other—and we both walked away from the experience thinking about what was not achieved through the meeting.

After detouring around Kenya (because of anti-American protests in Nairobi) to the Seychelles Islands, we landed in Cape Town, South Africa, where we docked for one week. The most compelling visits were those to Robben Island and the shantytowns of the outer city. While standing in the cell where Nelson Mandela slept for twenty-five years, viewing the grounds, and looking across the bay at the city, I found it difficult to believe how he and his comrades survived the Apartheid Era under such conditions.

Although Robben Island is no more than a tourist destination today, apartheid still seems to exist in the shantytowns. As the buses rolled down the streets, residents appeared and greeted us as if they were expecting guests. Memories from Chennai flooded my brain: how could we have an accurate view of life here if we came to see them like wildlife at a park? We were in a Trojan horse of sorts, but we were the people being fooled. Despite my dismay at the drama produced for our benefit, Diana helped me release my frustration and focus on the people rather than charade. The Western notion of "truth" or "accuracy" was just like my ongoing battle with my photography—capturing the "pure" culture on film. And although I thought I knew better, the archetype prevailed; my photographic eye searched for the despair, the poverty, and the struggle. Certainly, it wasn't "authentic," but then



Jerome Crowder, Politics in India, Mamalapuram, Chennai, India, 2001

demonstrating to me that her range-finder did not illustrate exactly what her lens captured. I learned that in order to capture what I saw, I'd have to aim a little higher and to the left. And that is the issue: my aim and her aim weren't perfectly in sync, and neither were the scenes that inspired me to record them.

We traveled to Cambodia to visit the ruins at Angkor Wat and explore the killing fields in Phnom Penh. Diana and I went everywhere together. She

introduced me to monks, locals, and tourists; and only later did I realize that I had forgotten to advance my film regularly. Although we watched the sun rise upon the tall turrets of Angkor and challenged the guards at the Silver Palace, the flaw lay not in her character but in my inadequacy. At the temples, I wanted to capture their size and beauty with an ultra wide 15mm lens, forgetting about Diana's simple view. At the Khmer Rouge torture center of S-21, we witnessed the

what is? Who wouldn't prepare for visitors, especially if they carried with them potential income and the power to retell your story to hundreds of people in America? The people we met told us of their violent history, their strife to make ends meet each day, and the segregation they still experience; but they did so with smiles, song, and beauty.

From South Africa, we set our bearings for Salvador, Brazil, our penultimate destination, but the last for more than one million African slaves since the 1700s. This gorgeous, historical city has an internal tension, or duality of sorts, between the old and new, rich and poor, and upper and lower city. I found the fusion of African and Latin cultural elements exemplified across the city and pervasive throughout the religion, language, food, and dress. A friend and I spent an entire day walking the streets taking pictures, speaking with people and realizing that what we wanted to find and what we saw occurred if we let it. Here, we believed, we could meld into the landscape and experience life. We forgot about our own influences as we followed the streets, the people and the light without stopping. Ultimately, we exhausted our reserve of film and energy in the middle of a *favela* (shantytown), where we had gone to meet people on our own. We anticipated some conflict but were determined to go because all of the other times we had been set up to meet residents. This time we arrived unannounced and open to the encounter.

Nothing was too different from our other visits to similar urban regions in Africa or Asia—people greeted us since we were obviously not from there, and we were offered food and hospitality as folks laughed while posing for photos. Even some men playing cards on the street welcomed us with a smile. Had we completely deceived ourselves? What is it about human nature that allows us to connect with each other despite our preconceptions? How long does it take to dissolve the idea that in the end, we can learn from each other, no matter the setting? Looking back through the Dianas from Salvador, I realize how my perspective had changed to see the people as humans and not as objects. Their fuzziness only reflects the relationship between people, the lack of contrast only demonstrates the precariousness we share, and the inaccurate composition stimulated me to think of the unlimited opportunities we have each day to read-dress our own perceptions of each other to find a way to better understand what we have to offer each other.

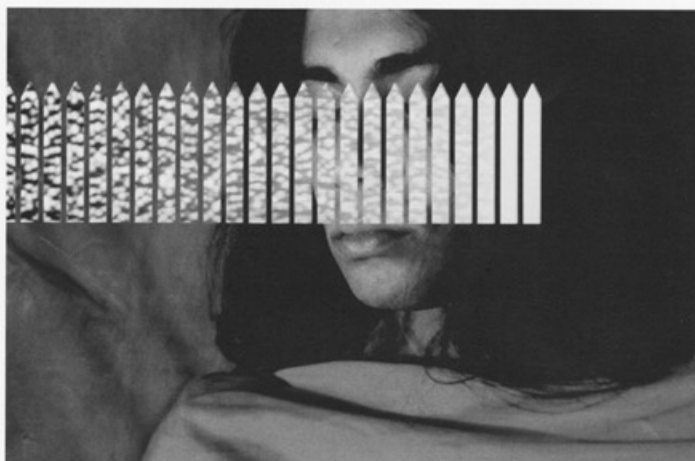
Our last stop, Cuba, allowed me the chance to recompose and integrate these issues. In Havana we were taken to hospitals, schools, museums, and historical places—Hemingway's hotel, the square, and the promenades. We were encouraged to spend our dollars and see their sites. Since our arrival in Cuba, people on the street were continually propositioning us and trying to make a few immediate dollars from tourists. Then, we met Diego, a local who invited us to his home for coffee, cigars, and frank conversation. Our intuition told us to follow him. And we did, day after day. At each meeting, Diego introduced to us more and more family members, and spoke more about life in Cuba. For us, this was the mundane adventure we had yearned for all along, without the pretense of class, tourism, or race.

One evening we stood on the seawall, facing north towards Miami. Diego asked how close I felt heaven and hell really were to each other. I shrugged my shoulders; it didn't matter much to me. "Ninety miles," he laughed. We laughed along, but like the best jokes, there was a thread of reality in this one. "You know, we love America, and we love its people, but we really dislike your government," Diego added, "It is our governments that cannot get along. This is the saddest part, that is the thing that keeps us from happiness—but you and I have found friendship despite them."

Looking back over the many photographs I took, I return to those from Diana because they are not simple documents of people, places, and things. Instead, they are revelations of what I had not seen, or at least, I had not meant to see. My ethnocentric preconceptions of the people I visited dissolved as their figures became less foreign and more relative to their context.

As many of us hide behind a lens to protect ourselves from "the other," Diana shortens the distance between us and our subject. Like Diego in Cuba, the people I met in the streets of Chennai, Cape Town, and Salvador saw me as a tourist; and I substantiated this feeling by using my high-tech technology to document their "reality." However, Diana much like the people I met, did not require much technology to survive. Diana challenged me to appreciate the beauty of the unknown at many different levels.

JEROME CROWDER HAS TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY THROUGHOUT BOLIVIA AND SOUTH AMERICA, INCLUDING TWICE AS A FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR IN 1995 AND 2003. CROWDER IS A LECTURER IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON. HE RECENTLY COMPLETED A 5-MONTH STAY AS A FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR AT THE UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DEL ALTIPLANO IN PUNO, PERU.



Prince Thomas, *Assimilations*, from *Interstitial Spaces*, Chromogenic Print, 1996 (original in color)
Lighty's 'n' Darky's, from *Interstitial Spaces*, Chromogenic Print, 1996 (original in color)

Snow White Meets Prince Thomas

INTERSTITIAL SPACES
PRINCE V. THOMAS
MARCH 1 - MARCH 29, 2003
THE ART STUDIO, INC.
BEAUMONT, TEXAS

ANDY COUGHLAN

Prince V. Thomas's installation of thirteen chromogenic prints (from his *Interstitial Spaces* series) and video (*Mediation*) expose the "cultural negotiations" of a Kuwait-born Indian raised equally in Texas and India. Thomas confronts many cultural assumptions within these two cultures with a thoughtful point-blank clarity.

Thomas explains in his artist statement, "I am an East Indian and American simultaneously. In other words, I am unable to distinguish where in which my Indianness stops and my American-ness begins." This frank dialogue with a U.S. reader/audience (one assumes the international audience is slim in Beaumont) reveals a refreshing use of the artist statement; a tepid genre that often omits race, color, economic background as static information.

Static is precisely the focus of Thomas' work. Using television white noise as a recurring motif, Thomas depicts the snowy TV picture in various colors and blurry renditions throughout his images and video. The media airwaves are potentially a site for political activism as seen in the work of media collective, Paper Tiger TV and artists who work in pirate radio. The interstices between Thomas' interventions open a space for this visual artist to address two cultures at once.

Thomas exposes the (somewhat predictable) tensions of a multicultural society; tensions between classes and ethnic groups; and between immigrants and native-born residents. *Flag* is a striking example of this tension. The shape of a flag is superimposed over orange-tinted TV snow. The message seems to welcome "huddled masses" yet, at the same time, enclose them behind a barbed-wire barrier seen at the bottom of the frame.

The Maharaja's New Clothes shows the invisible sacrifice that many U.S. immigrants make when leaving their

homeland and social caste behind. A black line-drawing of a 7-11 employee (wearing a logo-embroidered shirt and bowing his head in supplication) is superimposed over three bands of images, including a negative of the Red Fort castle in Delhi, India and colored TV snow.

Lighty's 'n' Darky's, a self-portrait, shows Thomas with his eyes closed and head wrapped in bandages. His face is flanked by two additional identical portraits in color and black-and-white. Thomas' alarming title refers to a racial slur used in contemporary Indian society.

The white picket fence, a classic symbol of American domestic bliss, is used to good effect as a symbol of cultural dominance in *Assimilations*. The outline of a fence partly covers the face of an Indian woman whose eyes are closed and whose head is turned away, as if she is resting on a pillow. The stylized fence posts change in color from dark speckled gray to pure white. *Assimilations* underscores the interstices between the fence, the posts, and the American dream.

Plymouth II shows a gray stone hovering over blurred static. Behind the static, we see a faded appearance of a face and a *stupa* (a Hindu shrine). The blurred and stretched treatment of these elements implies a movement of large proportions, as though *this rock* is a meteor set to collide with Plymouth, Massachusetts. Thomas' *Plymouth II* implies that those who leave their culture behind for "freedom" often inflict misery on the culture of their destination.

Mediation, the 6 and a half minute video includes elements from Thomas' photographs superimposed over several scenes: a cloudy sky, a woman walking on a beach, and a hand repeatedly making a fist. Throughout the video, Thomas overlays a band of speckled gray from television static as well as a soundtrack evoking rushing water. The innocuous scenes appear to be shot from behind a waterfall of white noise, flickering between the sprays of video signal. The audio soothes the tensions inherent in cultural clashes we confront (or ignore, depending on your position of privilege) on a daily basis.

Finally, Thomas' *Interstitial Spaces* reveals more cracks in the American dream than possibilities for political empowerment. One is reminded of the hypocrisy deeply rooted in a society founded by "outsiders."

ANDY COUGHLAN IS A BRITISH-BORN ARTIST, WRITER, ACTOR, AND DIRECTOR. HE IS WORKING ON A MASTER'S DEGREE IN ENGLISH AT LAMAR UNIVERSITY IN BEAUMONT, TEXAS.

YOU TRAVEL FAR

IAN VAN COLLER

ART MUSEUM OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS

OCTOBER 11-DECEMBER 7, 2003

ANDY COUGHLAN

Ian van Coller's *You Travel Far*, an exhibition of 16 works, explores time, race, and culture of his native South Africa. The richness of his mixed-media collage-assemblage is overwhelming—one is mesmerized by detail and finds oneself pulled into the space that exists between real time and physical space—the domain of memory.

Van Coller left South Africa to attend college in the U.S. 12 years ago. Now a full-time resident of Albuquerque, New Mexico, van Coller examines his childhood memories and the nation whose complex culture is still seeking an integrated identity.

Van Coller is a difficult artist to pigeonhole. He's primarily labeled a photographer, but could also be categorized as an installation artist or even a sculptor. Van Coller's earned this reputation by submerging his obscurely treated photographs behind layers of shellac surrounded by Victorian-style frames encased in a black mess of powder pigment, oil, mud, nails, and gold leaf. His irreverent treatment of the picture frame evokes the artist books of Anselm Kiefer, who used straw, lead, and semen in his sculptural books.

Van Coller's frames are more like cadavers with open wounds through



Ian van Coller, *You Travel Far*, 2002, Modern ambrotype, pigment prints, glass, wood, mud, powder pigment, India ink, ashes, nails, gold leaf, shellac

It's All in the Details

which one sees his photographs. The photographs are small-scale modern ambrotype and paint pigment prints. The ambrotype, like the tin-type, is a liquid light process that involves burning an image onto a glass panel; a process that takes several days to complete. Like memory, the exposed glass is fragile and subject to cracks.

Van Coller's wood constructions are his version of the African memory board. The memory board (or *Lukasa*) originates from southeastern Zaire; commonly decorated with pins, beads, and carved inscriptions, *Lukasa* are used in tribal ceremonies by the Luba peoples of southeastern Zaire. Van Coller dubs them "containers of memories." On his memory boards, van Coller incorporates photographs of his family and the domestic servants who cared for him; imposing his personal history onto his national history.

Van Coller integrates the South African landscape with portraits of friends and domestic help. *You Travel Far* depicts a large leafy tree surrounded by offerings, planted squarely in front of a doorway in a mud wall. The frame is decorated with rusty nails and two photographs. A small image in the upper right corner, reveals two black women, one standing with a suitcase in hand, the other, seated; both wear long necklaces and



Detail from *You Travel Far*, 2002

floor-length dresses. The opposite corner shows an equally tiny photo of smiling white faces: two blonde boys (including van Coller as a child) dressed identically (blazer, tie, paige-boy haircut), standing next to a woman (presumably, their mother) wearing a white jacket.

The juxtapositions of images and the treatment of the works themselves, leave spaces for the viewer to enter. The works exist, not in "real" time, but in a space that is atemporal, encompassing all time and space at once. We cannot see what is below the surface.

ANDY COUGHLAN

Ian van Coller, *Elsie and Genevieve*, 2002, Modern ambrotype, pigment prints, bottle caps, resin, wood, oil, mud, powder pigment, wooden spoon, ribbon, wire, nail



Reflecting on Revelations

REVELATIONS: DIANE ARBUS
WITH ESSAYS BY SANDRA PHILLIPS,
NEIL SELKIRK, AND DOON ARBUS.
RANDOM HOUSE, 2003

SIMON JAMES

Diane Arbus was born Diane Nemerov in 1923 into a wealthy New York family whose business was a Fifth Avenue clothing store. She attended the then progressive secondary school of Forest Hills; and her first contact with the arts, as might be expected for someone of her background, was painting.

Described as having not inconsiderable talent for the medium but little regard for it, she married Allan Arbus

in 1941. From that period on, photography seems to have been much more important to her, although it was only on her separation from her husband, 18 years later, that her real talent seems to have blossomed. Allan gave her a medium format Graflex camera, and she began taking classes with Bernice Abbott, primarily covering the technical aspects of the medium. An irony sneaks to the surface here in the fact that so many of the great photographers taught technique in order to put bread on the table and pay the rent. In the post-war New York of 1946, Diane, who is said to have had no interest in fashion, and Allan Arbus set up a fashion

photography studio, working on titles such as *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *Seventeen*. In addition to their commercial practice, both continued on more personal work.

Those who have studied photography in a formal course will be familiar with the imagery of Diane Arbus and the untraditional manner in which she used square format, direct flash photography, in what at the time was described as photojournalism. Equally, they are probably aware that she took her own life in 1971 and since that time has come to be regarded as one of America's truly ground breaking photographic artists. I was, therefore, unsurprised at first glance by this publication. Produced to accompany a major traveling retrospective exhibition of her work; the SFMOMA (2003) the MFA, Houston (2004), and London's Victoria & Albert Museum (2005), it has exactly the expensive sort of design and high production values you would expect. First glance, however, made me seriously question whether that was all that was on offer for what the publisher's release describes as "a milestone book for which we have been waiting years." Diane Arbus genuinely was a very major contributor to both photojournalism and the art of photography; and we have indeed been waiting a very long time for the sort of publication that really gets under the skin of her work. And yet it's always a subject for concern when the family or estate of an artist under the microscope is closely connected with the production of a book or exhibition: veils are often drawn across very relevant material that such people feel unable to release into the

public domain. Doon Arbus, however, perhaps a bit like her mother, seems unconcerned with pulling punches. When you peer beneath the skin of this book, it really does begin to deliver on the subject of the artist and the issues that drove her. On a personal note, I would like to have seen many more contact sheet reproductions; those that do appear tell us much about her shooting strategies. But I would not have wished to sacrifice much of the content in order to fit in the many more unpublished photographs, of which there must be thousands. Looking now at this selection of her pictures, made around 40 years ago, it's interesting to note the relevance they retain for contemporary issues. The young man shown here, waiting to march in a pro-war parade, was of course supporting a war long passed; but the sentiment and controversy of the shot seems far from out of place in 2003.

Diane Arbus was a troubled, gifted, ground-breaking, eventually tragic photographer whose work has very much stood the test of time. *Revelations: Diane Arbus* makes a real contribution to our understanding of her work and the influence it has had upon a number of photographers practicing today.

SIMON JAMES IS A PHOTOGRAPHER AND JOURNALIST BASED IN LONDON. HE IS CONTRIBUTING EDITOR TO THE ROYAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY JOURNAL, AND HIS MOST RECENT BOOK OF PHOTOGRAPHS IS *MIND THE GAP: AN UNAUTHORIZED GEOGRAPHY OF LONDON'S FAMOUS UNDERGROUND RAILWAY SYSTEM*.

All photographs by Diane Arbus

Clockwise from top:
A child crying, N.J. 1967
Copyright © 1972 The Estate of Diane Arbus, llc

A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing,
N.Y.C. 1966
Copyright © 1966 The Estate of Diane Arbus, llc

A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968
Copyright © 1968 The Estate of Diane Arbus, llc



The Poetics of Burton Pritzker

ARTIFACTS

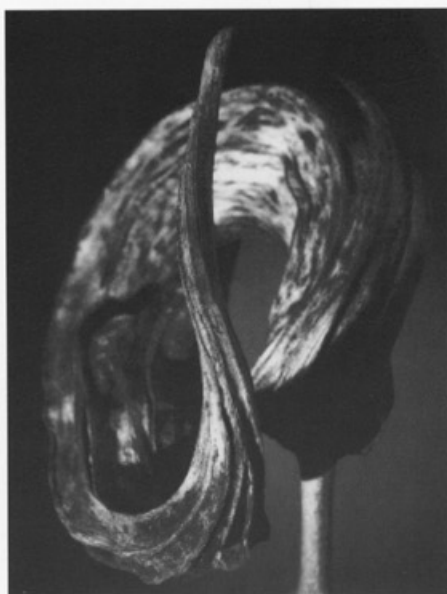
HOUSTON CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

SEPTEMBER 5–OCTOBER 26, 2003

ILEANA MARCOULESCO

In common parlance, "artifact" means any man-made object that may become, at some point, an object of cult or display. In a more specialized context, such as experimental-observational biology, an artifact is a specific structure that appears as a result of the interference between the observing device (such as a microscope) and the object observed, made more visible when "enhanced" with dye, a process that masks its original color and shape. The result makes an "objective" observation impossible.

Pritzker's 10 gelatin silver prints expand the very notion of artifact through an exquisite staging of organic microcosms enhanced from behind a subjective camera lens. His questioning eye, heart, and mind move banal organic



Burton Pritzker, *Okra #1*, gelatin silver print, 2003

Rather, it is a philosophical impulse to live in a world animated by secret significations—not an empty, neutral, predictable world of objects.

Avocado Seed, depicting a seed once moist with oils and juices, appears to be reflected in a concave mirror that invites the eye to tour and taste a distorted

world. The bulging kernel, where a new plant would later sprout, seduces the attentive eye to discover a potential, vital universe.

Similarly, *Magnolia Petal*, a barely sketched petal emerging in a curve of light, and *Magnolia Seed Pod*, propel the viewer into a fantastic landscape full of traps and accidents. Pritzker's mysterious and provocative images intensify even the most conventional subject. Isn't that precisely the intent and technique of modernism, to act on our senses

and intellect, not through a sum total of descriptive details, but through one or a few significant ones which stand for the whole?

Turning to the most original work in this exhibition—both in Pritzker's choice of content and mysteriousness of form—*Midge Gall I* and *II* portray the swelling (or gall) induced by the sting of a female gnat-like insect (a midge) that will nest in this swollen vegetal tissue.

Calla Lilies alludes to Zen Buddhist calligraphy. Black sepals emerge through a sensitive tracing or path of light carved into the negative. In this work, Pritzker combines the everyday object and

allusions to a refined Oriental culture to extraordinary effect.

Pritzker's masterful ability to highlight minute voids, in otherwise opaque organic matter, is in part a combination of subtle lighting, observation, and a unique penchant for puzzling metaphors pitting the microscopic against the huge. For example, *Acorn Shells* leads the viewer through natural caverns and openings. Two shells, one obscured in shadow, the other, pierced with light, invite the viewer to enter spheres of the imaginary. Pritzker unites things

and their contraries in cryptic disproportion (shall I say Taoist?); between cause and effect; between the microscopic midge and the massive gall. There are a lot of dark corners and meanings in these images, which lead the viewer as far away from the known as from convention.

In his artist statement, Pritzker freely quotes from William Blake and Walt Whitman, whose cosmic view synthesizes the human, animal, and vegetal. Such poetry ignites this photographer's inspiration in signs, forms, and destinies. Yet, it is obvious Pritzker translates poetry into artistic matter; a physical reaction to a metaphysical space where Blake once spun myths, narrative, resounding rhetoric, and maximal poetic noise. Pritzker's photography swims in understatement, gnomic aphorism, cryptic Zen-like notation. When the practice of his poetics reaches a perceptible sublime, however, it is expressed not in theological discourse or in effusive epic, but in a striking haiku-style economy of means.

To the question Pritzker has repeatedly asked himself—is a Romantic view of things, their elusive, sometimes messy volumes, shadows, and meanings compatible with a modernist view of form as severe harmony, high resolution, self-and other-transcendence, lead to another level of perception? The answer is emphatically, yes.

ILEANA MARCOULESCO IS A HOUSTON-BASED PHILOSOPHER AND WRITER WHO HAS CONTRIBUTED TO ARTLIES, ART PAPERS, SCULPTURE, AND SPOT. SHE IS WORKING ON A FICTITIOUS, TRAGIC-COMIC MEMOIR, *LA FEMME DADA*.

BOOKS RECEIVED & NOTED Compiled by Fabiola Valencia

Armstrong, Frank. Foreword by Jan Reid; with an introduction by Roy Flukinger. *Rock, River & Thorn: the Big Bend of the Rio Grande*. Calgary, Alberta: Waterous & Co., 2001. Armstrong takes the viewer to Big Bend National Park, Texas, a chunk of the Northern Chihuahuan Desert that lies deep in West Texas along the part of the Rio Grande River that marks the border with Mexico.

Baily, W.H. *Defining Edges*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002. Baily examines more than fifty works of art—some famous masterpieces and some little-known works—and explores how their frames, many designed or made by the artists themselves, relate to the pictures they surround.

Begleiter, Steven H. *The Art of Color Infrared Photography*. Buffalo, NY: Amherst Media, 2002. Begleiter shares his knowledge with the reader by introducing infrared color photography and how to use it.

Bernhard, John. *Nicaragua: A Journey to Remember*. Houston, TX: Nicaraguan Children Texas Benefit Fund, 2002. *A Journey to Remember* covers Bernhard's mid-'80s trip to Nicaragua. Proceeds from the sale of this book contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of the Nicaraguan children.

Capp, Kristin. *Americana*. Zurich: Stemmler Publishers, 2000. The photographs in *Americana* are the result of a five-year project documenting Capp's travel across the U.S. They encompass a broad territory that spans the continent and ranges from traditional family values to post-judgemental urbanity.

Cohen, John. *The Shape of Survival*. Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2002. Cohen documents the lives of the Andean people of Peru.

Davidson, Bruce. *Time of Change: Civil Rights Photographs 1961–1965*. Los Angeles, CA: St. Ann's Press, 2002. This is a collection of Davidson's documentary work during the early '60s in America. These images offer a glimpse of the struggle for human rights: demonstrations, protests, bombings, and Jim Crow signs.

Davidson, Bruce. *East 100th Street*. Los Angeles, CA: St. Ann's Press, 2003. Originally published by Harvard University Press (1970), this book depicts Davidson's documentary work in Spanish Harlem mid-1960s.

Edelstein, Jillian. *Truth & Lies*. New York: The New Press, 2002. *Truth & Lies* is a record of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began in 1996 in South Africa to investigate over thirty years of human rights and violations. Introduction by Michael Ignatieff, and an essay by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela.

Feinstein, Gloria Baker, text by Davis, Keith F. *Convergence*. Lunenburg, Vermont: Stinehour Press, 2002. Feinstein's photographs (mostly of children) are taken from low and high camera angles, close vantage points, and tilted frames.

continued on p. 20



Burton Pritzker, *Midge Gall #1*, gelatin silver print, 2003

objects in a metaphysical direction. The result is a powerful metamorphosis of seeds, fruit, and decaying flowers from scientific specimen to artistic artifact.

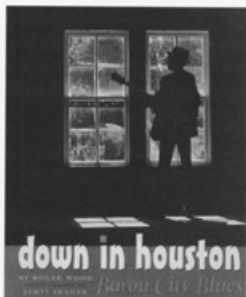
Pritzker never looks at the beauty of things through a naturalistic lens. No doubt that nature, in his mind, is the repository of all beauty and signification. But to remain prisoner to a classic vision of nature through a so-called photographic eye, even with the added embellishing light effects, would be trite and boring. It is not modernistic fashion or snobbery that drives this photographer to seek hidden angles, recesses, and abstruse meanings in everyday objects.

BOOKS

continued from p. 19

Finnemore, Peter, text by Durden, Mark. *Gwendraeth House*. Cardiff, Wales: FotoGallery, 2000.

Gwendraeth House brings together two series of works: *Avant Gardener*, presented as traditional documentary black & white photographs, depicting fabricated scenes in around the artist's home, and *Lesson 56: Wales*, a series of large-format, constructed photographs that investigate the historical and contemporary fractures of Welsh identity as a direct result of colonialism.



Fraher, James, Wood, Roger. *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003.

Since 1995, Woods and Fraher have been gathering the story of the blues in Houston. They draw on dozens of interviews with musicians, club owners, audience members, and music producers, as well as dramatic black-and-white photographs of performers and venue to present a detailed portrait of the Houston blues scene, past and present.

Friedlander, Lee, afterword by Benson, Richard. *At Work*. New York, Distributed Art Publishers, 2002. Since the 1960s, Friedlander has been observing and chronicling the world around him. In this collection of photographs we see American workers in locations such as factories, offices, telemarketing centers, and corporate offices.

Gober, Robert. Robert Gober. *Chicago, IL: The Art Institute of Chicago*. 2001. A summary of Gober's work, including photographs of his installation at the 49th Venice Biennale. Included is an analysis of his previous work.

Hajitema, Arno. Zand Water Veen: Harena Aqua, Palus. *Amsterdam: De Verbeelding*. 2001. Work by Wout Berger, Wijnande Deroo, Bertien van Manen, and Noor Damen. Featuring landscapes of South Holland.

Lindbergh, Peter, Wenders, Wim. *Peter Lindbergh Stories*. Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions. 2002. *Stories* is an exposé of Lindbergh's working process. The book features the printed campaigns from *Vogue Italia*, *L'Uomo*, and *Vogue*, along with outtakes, test shots (Polaroids), and scouting photographs used to create these "little films."

Mehlman, Janice, text by Rosenblum, Dr. Naomi. *Photographs*. New York: Rosenberg & Kaufman Fine Art, 2002.

Mehlman's photographic images, based largely on physical architectural entities such as archways, cornices, and stairwells, are large in scale and contrasting in tonalities.

Menil Foundation, Inc. *Vik Muniz: Model Pictures*. Houston, TX: Menil Foundation, Inc., 2002. *Vik Muniz: Model Pictures* is the first exhibition organized by the museum in this context that explores the conceptual realm of photography. It presents works by Muniz that have not been shown before.

Michaud, Roland and Sabrina, introduction by Velter, Andre. *Afghanistan: The Land that Was*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002. The Michauds spent 14 years, from 1964 to 1978, documenting Afghanistan. Images include views of the landscape, cities, and individual portraits taken before the recent social and political upheaval.



Mills, Joseph, text by Tucker, Anne. *Inner City*. Tucson, Arizona: Nazraeli Press, 2003. In this book Mill's work consists of black-and-white street photography that is part of an ongoing series. This series takes place in Washington, DC.

Moore, David G., Hesse, Gary. *Ephemeral Beings*. Syracuse, NY: Jupiter Press, 2000. This publication contains three sections, *Ephemeral Beings*, *Projects of Ridicule*, and *Dark Eros*. It encompasses a search for identity and definition.



Pritzker, Burton, Pritzker, Renee Walker. *Texas Rangeland*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002. Pritzker captures icons of Texas including cows, bulls, and steers. Accompanying the photos is a running commentary that blends the voices of many Texans looking at the images into a single voice telling stories of ranch life and of working with cattle.

Rosenthal, Karin. *Twenty Years of Photographs*. West Stockbridge, MA: Distributed by Hard Press, 2000. Rosenthal's photographs present nude forms in and of water. Her work combines the nude, landscape, abstraction, sculpture, and photography.



Rossell, Daniela. *Ricas y Famosas*. Madrid Spain: Turner Publications, 2002. Rossell focuses on the dependents of the rich and famous in this series. Rossell observes her subjects in their homes with their belongings.

Rulfo, Juan, Sacabo, Josephine. *Pedro Paramo*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002. Rulfo sets his novel *Pedro Paramo*, a tale that intertwines a man's quest to find his lost father and reclaim his patrimony with the father's obsessive love for a woman who will not be possessed – Susana San Juan. Sacabo does the photography consisting of dark sepia toned images.

Ruwedel, Mark. *The Italian Navigator*. Canada: Art 45, Bulger Gallery, Galerie Paviot, 2000. This is a cycle of photographs and texts depicting the Manhattan Project and Cold War landscapes in the American West. These landscapes include the sites of the development of the Atomic Bomb, and the nuclear madness that followed. The history, as written on the land, is framed in the context of the European conquest of the New World.

Samuelson, Timothy, Hiss, Tony. *Building Images: Seventy Years of Photography at Hedrich Blessing*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books LLC, 2000. Hedrich Blessing is a firm dedicated to commercial and documentary architectural photography. This book concentrates on composition, lighting, and perspective in architecture.

Schermerhorn, Kate. *America's Idea of a Good Time*. Stockport, England: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2001. Schermerhorn goes in search of just what the title suggests. They take us on a journey through the rich gamut of America's idea of a "good time."

Schmidt, Bastienne. *American Dreams*. Switzerland: Edition Stemmler AG, 1997. Schmidt, born outside the U.S., gives her perspective of a modern America. Hers is an album of what few tourists and fewer residents have noticed.

Simone, Chip. *On Common Ground: Photographs from the Crossroads of the New South*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996. The once segregated Piedmont Park now serves as the public common ground for the entire city of Atlanta. These photographs of the park look at life in today's South.

Smulders, Magriet. *Sirene Verlangen en verleiding* (Siren Desire and seduction). The Netherlands: Kempen, 2002. Smulders arranges modern Dutch still-lives (flowers, draperies, fruit) with out-of-focus and sharp elements using effects from water and a mirror.

Sottsass, Ettore. *Metaphors*. Milano, Italy: Skira Editore S.p.A., 2002. Both a private journal and a story told in picture, *Metaphors* reveals the cultural and visual roots of Sottsass's work and offers us a glimpse into his mental and creative processes. Sottsass conceived and designed this book in its entirety.

Stewart, David. *Fogeys*. UK: David Stewart and Browns, 2001. Using a post-modernist vision, and his characteristic English humor, the "golden years" are portrayed with a child's innocence and an adult's irreverence.

Szarkowski, John. *William Eggleston's Guide*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976. Eggleston's *Guide* was the first one-man show of color photographs ever presented at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Museum's first publication of color photography. *The Guide* contains 48 images culled from 375 photographs taken from 1969 to 1971.

Tompkins, Mark. *Remembering to Live: Visual Poems for the Journey*. Houston, TX: Evolving Editions, 2002. Tompkins merges photographs with text creating *Visual Poems* that are expressive and multi-dimensional. Tompkins is an author and an award-winning photographer whose work is exhibited internationally.



Torgovnik, Jonathan. *Bollywood Dreams*. New York, NY: Phaidon Press Limited, 2003. Torgovnik explores the pastime of an Indian population of over one billion. Learn about the motion picture industry and its culture in India.

Williams, Terry Tempest. *In Response to Place: Photographs from the Nature Conservancy's Last Great Places*. Bullfinch Press, 2001. In celebration of its 50th anniversary, The Nature Conservancy asked a dozen contemporary photographers to spend some time at a handful of the "last great places." This volume features original, unpublished images by Annie Leibowitz, Richard Misrach, Sally Mann, William Wegman, Mary Ellen Mark, Lynn Davis, Lee Friedlander, Hope Sadow, William Christenberry, Fazal Sheikh, Karen Halverson, and Terry Evans.

Wilson, Laura. *Hutterites of Montana*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000. Hutterites practice communal living through shared ownership of all property and income. This book documents a Hutterite community in Montana, based on Wilson's photographs and her interviews over a 14-year period.

Wolf, Michael. *Sitting in China*. Gottingen: Steidl, 2002. German photographer Wolf documents the topic of sitting in China, as well as portraits of vernacular chairs and footstools.

Worswick, Clark. *Bernice Abbott & Eugene Atget*. Santa Fe, NM: Arena Editions, 2002. Drawn from work in previously unpublished archives, this book details Abbott's rare prints of Atget's negatives for the first time. View Atget's work spanning over a 29 year period from 1898 to 1927.

2004 PRINT AUCTION

HCP would like to thank the artists, underwriters, staff and volunteers for their contributions to the 2004 Print Auction. It is through the support of the photographic community that we are able to continue our mission as an educational and cultural organization that deepens the understanding and appreciation of the photographic arts.

The auction was held on Tuesday, February 10, 2004. The next auction will be in February 2005.

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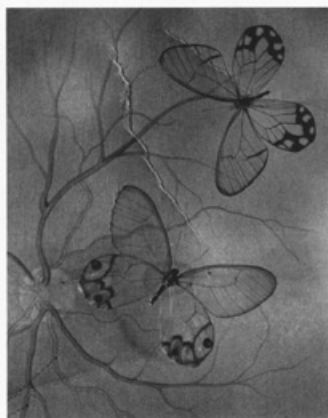
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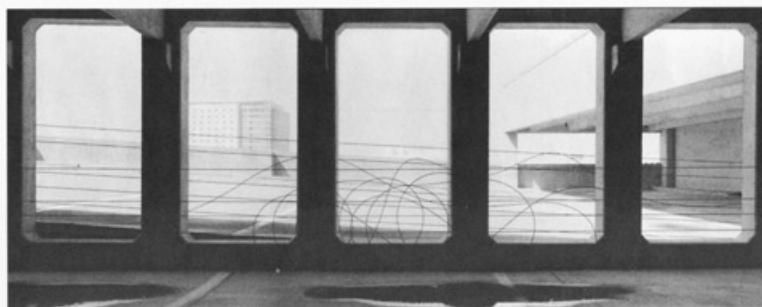
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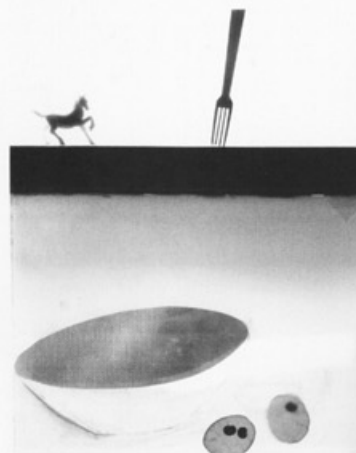
Hiroshi Watanabe
White Terns, Midway Atoll, 2000
Gelatin silver print, 6" x 6"



Jo Whaley
In Veins from the Entomology series, 2000
Type C print, 12 1/2" x 9 1/2"



Clay Harmon
Institutional Logic, 2003
Palladium on vellum, 7" x 16"



Susan Dunkerley
This is the Shape of the Soul #5, 2001
Toned gelatin silver print, 11 1/2" x 9"



Rolfe Home
Sea of Japan, Tottori, Japan, 2001
Gelatin silver print, 8" x 7 1/2"

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