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New Photogravures by Bruce Barnbaum!

LensWork

Photography and the Creative Process · Articles · Interviews · Portfolios

No. 40 Apr - May 2002

Interviews
Edouard Boubat
David Plowden

Portfolios
Mark Edward Harris
Tamara Lischka
David Plowden

EndNotes
by Bill Jay

LensWork

40
APR — MAY
2002

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Editors
Brooks Jensen
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

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Editor's Comments

Cheap Shots

I don't know precisely when it was, but sometime in the last twenty years it looks as though a good number of photographers (lead along by the funding institutions) have caved-in to the idea that photographic art has to be rooted in the "reality-based" issues of life, at least using their definition of *reality*. Instead of incorporating "real life" qualities such as dignity, sorrow, or love, the attention seems to be given to photographic work which is denigrating, ugly, devaluating, demonic, socially combative, distant, stupid, trite, and meaningless crap. At least, *that is the way it feels*.

I know I can only speak for myself here, and as the editor of *LensWork* I put myself at considerable risk by stating this, but I've *had it* with galleries (and public-funded museums) foisting "fine art" on a public that just doesn't get it. What's to get!? How do photographs of headless corpses, molested bodies, Japanese fetish girls, pre-pubescent nudes, violence to women photographs, violence to men photographs, violence to animals photographs, photographs celebrating drug addicts, and the like qualify as *art*? I'm offended (and more than a little annoyed) that photographic art has been reduced to some sort of thrill-factor. Art (I speak as an artist here) is one of the highest expressions of human achievement. When I see such drivel thrust forward as "fine art" it's as if Shakespeare were employed to produce slasher films – because they *sell*.

Having said that, let me clarify that I am talking about fine art photography. The world is a rough and tumble place. Suffering exists. People are starving and misery is far too common. And there is a place for the photography of this side of life. But is it *fine art*? When did the line between *art* and *news* disappear?

If one were to take a look at the state of photography in the closing years of the 20th Century one would have to conclude that life in our times is as bad as it has ever been on the planet. The truth is that we are living in a time and in a place that is the richest, healthiest, most hope-filled time *in the history of the planet*. Never have life-spans been so long, life so easy, and prosperity and freedom so wide-spread. People don't want to hear this now. Prosperity and happiness are not universal, of course. But because there are those

who suffer and struggle does not mean that prosperity and happiness are *absent*. If I were to believe the "truth" of much photo-realism I would conclude that there is no happiness, there is no joy, there is no beauty, there is no finer meaning, there is no higher purpose, there is no culture, there is no more photogenic landscape, there are no more nice people, and much of that has been replaced by pestilence, ugliness, depravity, death, torture and mayhem. *What the hell is all of this about?* Is this merely a photographic fad, like jumping mid-air dancers or dewy spider webs? Or is there something more to this?

I've concluded this is not merely a fad, but is rooted in something much deeper, and more insidious. I can illustrate this if I don't restrict my comments to shock-value imagery. I am similarly tiring of "pretty picture" work as well; photographs that fail to find the heart of the subject. Insipid art is just as meaningless as art that celebrates degradation.

As strange as it may seem at first blush, both of these types of images suffer, I think, from the same problem. *They are easy to make.* Both require little involvement, little thought, and little preparation. Anyone with a camera can walk down just about any public street and find decay. *Click!* Or to the Wondrous Scenic View Point. *Click!* And these images can be right next to each other on the same roll of film! Neither takes a personal investment. Neither require time or depth. Neither need interrupt our smoothly flowing lives as we bounce from air conditioned car to air conditioned home, from weekend of leisure to week of vacation, from entertainment on the tube to entertainment on the big screen to entertainment at the art gallery. Funny, but the greatest instrument ever invented to give us access to our world (the camera) can so easily become the vehicle that insulates us from it.

Why has the art world so enthusiastically embraced images that are, well, *ugly?* I tend to believe that, simply stated, it is a difficult thing to create an innovative and new image that is uplifting, beautiful, inspirational, motivational, life-affirming, or a positive statement – far more difficult than it is to make its opposite. Photography – or for that matter *any* art – is *hard work*. The technical aspect alone of photography takes years to perfect. Then add the demands of pursuing excellence, the difficulty inherent with communicating, the movement of growth during life, and the complicated fast-paced dance of life, and it can be stated with some assurance that capturing that on film is not an easy task. Life is fleeting. Death is motionless. Which do you suppose is easier to photograph?

Then, there is also the benefit of shock value. The more the image shocks, the more it gathers attention, the more it gathers press, the more it gathers accolades, the more successful and famous the photographer is. If this is the case, then photographers who make such images are treading a very fine line between socially redeeming images and merely exploitative and blatant fame-seeking ones.

As much as I resist such broad-brush accusations, I believe a great deal of pessimistic photography (and trite feel-good photography, too) is based simply in *laziness*. To state it simplistically, it's easy to go downtown and find a homeless person to photograph; it's much more difficult to create a stunning portrait that inspires. Street hookers, dilapidated buildings, roadkill animals, and garbage are more readily accessible than someone's private back yard garden, the joy of a tender moment, or the non-visual emotions like accomplishment, friendship, or spiritual insight.

This is not new. The history of photography is really the history of public life. Other than studio still lifes and nudes, what else can you think of, photographically speaking, that isn't readily accessible to the public? Think of the work of Paul Strand, Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, Weegee, André Kertész, Elliot Porter, Edward Weston, Wynn Bullock, or any of the other great photographers. Very few of their photographs have been made in private places. The grand landscape, building exteriors, cemeteries, public bars, boat docks, subways, beaches, national parks, urban streets, and war zones – all these represent a huge percentage of what we know as fine art photographic *locations* – and all are public places. Is this because photographers that connect to an audience must be made in places we have in common? Or is it simply because these locations are readily accessible without much work?

I became acutely aware of this idea of accessibility while photographing in Japan. As a tourist I walked around the streets and public gardens and found myself wanting to be in the homes, back yards, and private gardens in the neighborhoods I visited. Because of the language and cultural barriers it was very difficult to develop a relationship with a stranger from a different land who would grant me access to their private life, or an invitation to photograph in their homes. In America I've had very little difficulty getting invitations to photograph in these places because I could talk with the people and they could get to know me and I them. I often spend *hours* talking with an individual before asking if I may photograph in their space. How much easier

and quicker it would be to walk up to a homeless person, an abandoned building, or a scenic viewpoint and snap a picture.

I was visiting some family in North Dakota a few years ago when I discovered an old school house, now abandoned but still equipped with the desks, piano, and books that were once the center of the lives of so many children. By asking around I gained permission from the caretaker to open the building and photograph *inside*. In retrospect, he probably agreed to allow me access with the assumption that a few quick pictures wouldn't take too much time. Later, when the photography session of several hours was over, he confessed he was amazed that photography was such a complex and involved procedure. I explained to him that photography was not that difficult, but seeing, feeling, learning, listening, and thinking all take time. Photography takes just fractions of a second.

When I look at the volume of images produced which don't look deeply at our world – grab shots that are snatched at a fraction of a second with a fraction of a second's *thought* – I see even deeper problems expressed: the cult of instant gratification. Never before in the history of the planet have so many people had so much time, so many resources, been so rich with wisdom and experience, and heaped with so much talent and education. You'd think we could create art that would stagger the imagination and surpass the ancient masters with ease. We can, even with instantaneous tools like cameras, but only if we recognize that cheap shots of the surface of things will always remain as shallow as the surfaces they render.

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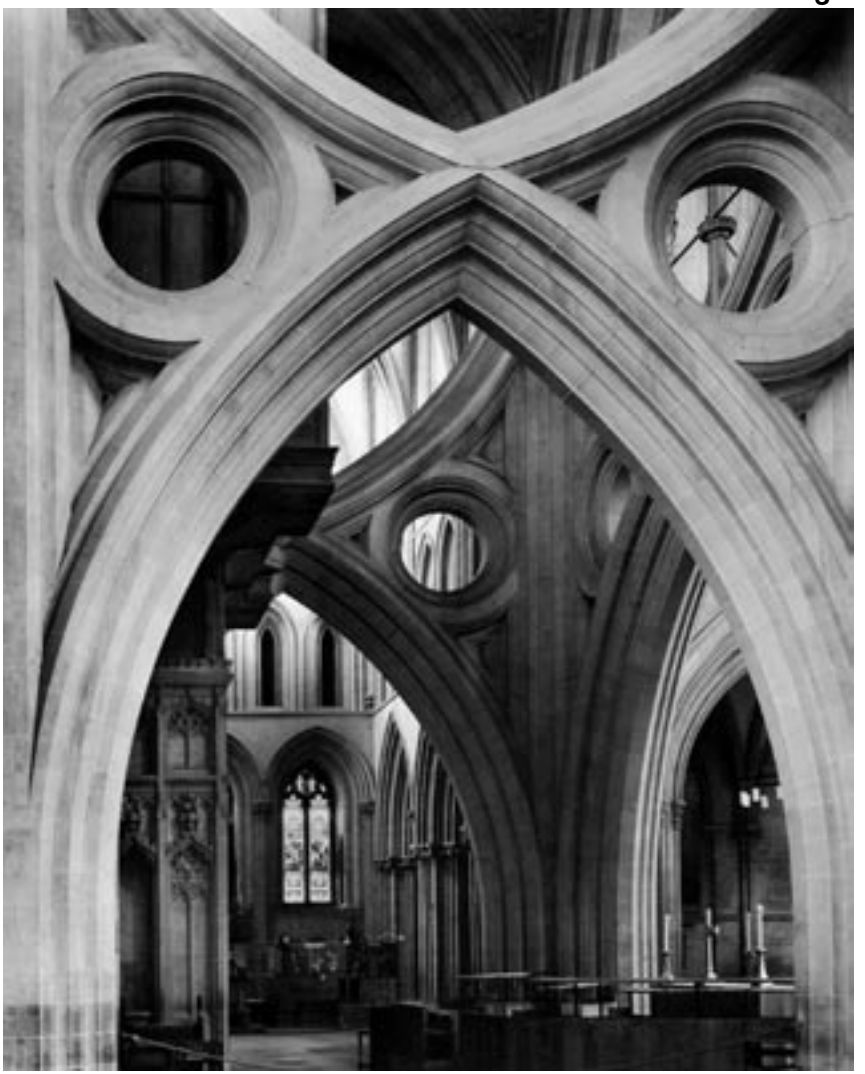

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by

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EDOUARD BOUBAT

(b. 1932, Paris, France)

Figuratively Speaking

by

Tamara Lischka

Interview with David Plowden

Brooks Jensen: Let me begin by asking a question about your *style* of photography. Most people, I suspect, think of David Plowden photographs as Americana imagery, particularly from your books like *Small Town America*. You might be perceived as the photographic Norman Rockwell, in some regards, but, I know this is typecasting that isn't accurate. There is a lot more in your photography than meets the eye.

David Plowden: Well, I wouldn't want to be typecast as Norman Rockwell because he's never really been a favorite of mine. One of the things that I've always felt about my photography is that there is a certain nostalgia, a certain nostalgic feeling to my photographs because I started out photographing locomotives – particularly steam locomotives. They were disappearing when I was a child and I guess early on – when I was eleven or twelve years old – I got the idea of photographing them. It was almost a childhood mission. That set the stage in my life for a career in photographing things that were disappearing. It's an awful expression, but it's said that I've been "one step ahead of the wrecking ball." And in a way I have. That's by accident and also by *design*. I do a lot of research before I photograph and know where these sorts of things are going to take place, where the last engine runs are going to happen. I've felt it was important for me to document these things. I try to bring back to people the importance of small towns, of farms, of steel mills, of all of these things. I try to save them, as it were, on film – to preserve them so that people can perhaps appreciate what we have lost.

Disappearing America

by

David Plowden

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