

New LensWork Special Editions Images from Huntington Witherill!

No. 26 • Aug - Oct 1999



LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process Articles Interviews Portfolios

QUARTERLY



Interview & Portfolio
Huntington Witherill

Essay
David Hum & Bill Jay

Portfolios
James Whitlow Delano
R. R. Jones

LENSWORK

Q U A R T E R L Y



Photography and the Creative Process
Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

No. 26

Aug — Oct 1999

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LENSWORK QUARTERLY #26

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS



Creativity and Confusion

I've come to the conclusion that there is considerable confusion these days in the arts community about the nature of creativity. It is currently a fad to equate creativity with *abandon* — that is to say, a *purposeful abnormality*. A great deal of art is now messy, disordered, chaotic, and distasteful. An artist throws a bucket of paint off the roof, splashes it onto a canvas a couple of stories below, creates a giant mess and it is called "*creative*." Combine this with another common popular myth — that true creativity is somehow anti-establishment — and people start confusing *creativity* with *chaotic anarchy*.

The confusion between bizarreness and creativity becomes clouded because it is so easy to compile a list of unconventional people who have been great artists — Lenny Bruce, Jimi Hendrix, Jackson Pollock, and Van Gogh, to name just a few. It is seductive to conclude that what makes these people creative is their *abnormality, schizophrenia, substance abuse,*

or anti-social behavior. Although creativity and abnormality may often go together, there is no *cause and effect relationship* between them. Because one is *weird* does not mean they are creative, either in personality or in the artwork created. Worse yet, implied in this erroneous strategy of expression is its corollary — that normalcy, manners, tact, sensitivity, and humility are somehow *not* creative. Translation: if it can be *understood*, it must not be creative.

The truth that flies in the face of this thinking is that creative vision is almost never a *mess*. Instead, it is a *clarification* of what could not be seen so easily without it. Michelangelo was creative because he saw, and then painted, what others could not. Using the same logic, Jimi Hendrix was also creative because he heard, and then performed, music that others could not. It was not his anti-social behavior that made him a creative individual. It was his talent and vision to see a new and

different (albeit *complicated*) non-mess that demands our admiration, not his antics. Both of these artists distilled and clarified their vision so we could see it, too. I suppose the difficulty is in distinguishing between *mere* mess and *genius* mess.

Picasso was *avant garde* but he did not create *mess*. He created an order that might have *appeared* like a mess to those who were as yet uninitiated into his view of the world. That is to say, the art of a genius may *look* simple — or perhaps I should say like the art of a beginner — but it is not. A first grader's first attempt at a clay ash tray and a Japanese master's tea cup can both be called *simple* but they are not the same. The simplicity of genius and the simplicity of the novice are related but not interchangeable.

I am tired of seeing crayon stick figures drawn by school age children splayed in airport lobbies as *art*. Sure, children are virtuous because of their innocence. This does not make their *artwork* virtuous. When is someone going to stand up and say, bluntly, that this is *bad art* which is not worthy of public display? A child's art certainly belongs on the refrigerator as an encouragement to develop their skills, but to thrust it on the public is to insult them and to falsely delude the budding artist

that *hard work* and *time* are not necessary components to *accomplishment*. Every time I see such displays I can't help but think of the mature artists who are struggling to find an audience (or make a living) who do not "qualify" for such exposure because they are adults or, God forbid, asking for money directly rather than through the sham of some non-profit organization or politically correct agenda. A child, who is subsidized in their artwork by a parent, does not need the subsidy of the exhibitor. The working and mature artist of accomplishment *relies* on it. Shouldn't we **reward** *accomplishment* rather than *potential*?

I was long ago thoroughly and convincingly hoodwinked by a false guru. His art was weird, trite, amateurish and thoroughly inconsequential. Nonetheless, he convinced me with the power of his authority and my timidity that his intelligence and artwork were so subtle, so deeply mysterious, so significantly *esoteric* that my failure to understand him or his artwork was only a manifestation of my own limitations. With what criteria does the initiate judge the master? True genius, he persuaded, would instantly recognize him for the mystic he claimed he was. To a naïve and insecure eighteen year old, it was a convincing argument. I now

cringe when I hear such piffle offered up as a defense for inferior artwork.

Inferior artwork? There is a popular movement against such value judgements. It proposes that value judgments are meaningless in the world of art. Nonsense! That the world of art should be without standards of *quality* is ridiculous. The idea that obtuse and obscure artwork is *better* is merely an excuse. I am also tired of exhibits that offer ill-conceived, badly executed, shallow and meaningless drivel as deep and profound artistic insights.

Do not, however, mistake my sentiment — I am not against the *new*. I am against the *banal* masquerading under the guise of the *esoteric*. Far too often there is an “in joke” quality in the piffle I see that is supposed to intimidate me into submission of my opinions lest I embarrass myself by confessing my naiveté. Hogwash! Certainly my opinions are not sacrosanct, but neither are those of the artist whose work is venerated as an emperor without clothes. Honest *debate* might be called for, education certainly, but not a pacifist response to blatant hoodwinking!

We *are* so easily hoodwinked because we seem to have forgotten that *genius* and *discipline* are the inseparable *yin* and *yang*

of great art. Because the bizarre and the abnormal are so easily achieved, it becomes very seductive for some to produce a mere mess and promote it as genius, especially to the general, “less educated” public who will buy it, philosophically and commercially. Such pretense is based on blind faith in an unethical authority. Nowhere is the confusion about this more evident than so many of today’s MFA programs. We judge the work *not* on its innate ability to communicate and inspire with clarity, but on the value of the MFA itself. When was the last time you read an artist’s statement that *clarified* anything?

All of this becomes so muddled because we cannot seem to bring ourselves to pass judgments anymore. *All art is virtuous when seen from a certain point of view*. How absurd. Using this logic, the actions of a mass murderer are virtuous when considered from the point of view of an insect because they so effectively use their opposable thumb! The stick figure of a child or the mess of an incompetent adult artist are virtuous only when seen from the point of view of public who is uneducated or unwilling to say, *This is bad art*.

Artwork, if it is worth anything, is all about quality — quality in vision, quality in intensity, quality in *life*. The process of

being an artist is nothing more than the pursuit of quality above all other concerns. An artist who does not strive for excellence is an oxymoron. An artist who substitutes a fake experience for creative insight is a hack, a charlatan, a liar, a phony, a cheat.

Bad art, good art — it's such a thorny issue. If what I am proposing is true, then an appropriate question might be *how can you tell the difference between true creativity and a mere mess?* I'm afraid this is an unanswerable question, but it is a *knowable experience*. That it cannot be accurately defined *in words* does not make it unreal. Many experiences are knowable without being describable. As Saint Augustine said when asked to give a definition of *reality*, "I *know* what it is, but when I try to *say* what it is, I don't." Similarly, I *know* when a piece of art is piffle and when it is not, even though I may not be able to *explain* it. I just wish more people would be honest about the drivel and perhaps, if we are fortunate, we could find ourselves surrounded by more artwork that is worthy of our attention.

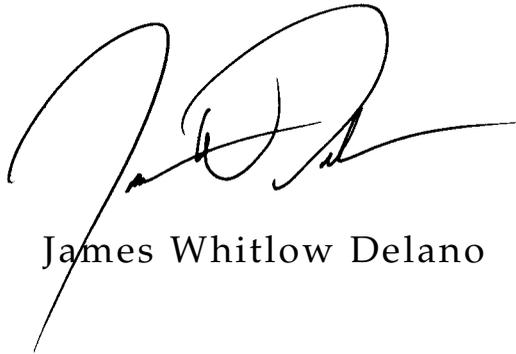
This, in the final analysis, is what the career of an artist is all about. What separates the immature artist from the master is the *developed eye*, the *developed*

hand, the trained sense of intuition (as paradoxical as that sounds), the recognition that differentiates a meaningless wodge from a piece of art. Any oaf can take an old typewriter, beat on it with a sledge hammer a couple of times, mount it on a block of walnut and call it *Opus 13*. They may even fool enough people to have a career, but it would be a dishonest one. I say this because the artist's product is nothing more than a reflection of an artist's *mind* and *life*. When a mind and a life are shallow, so is the art work. No amount of manipulative shenanigans can cover up for lack of genuine creativity. No amount of purposeful mess can disguise a lack of deeper insight. If we are to clarify the confusion about all the bad artwork we now see, it must begin with an honest appraisal and the courage to speak with conviction when rubbish is exhibited as genius. We must not be so afraid of a difference of opinion that we are willing to sacrifice quality in our values for harmonious banality.

JAPAN

Living in Two Worlds

by

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several large, overlapping loops and a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

James Whitlow Delano



MORALITY, AND WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT

by

David Hurn and Bill Jay

Photography is a potent medium of expression. Properly used it is a great power for betterment and understanding; misused it can kindle many troublesome fires. Photographic journalism, because of the tremendous audience reached by publications using it, has more influence on public thinking and opinion than any other branch of photography. For these reasons, it is important that the photographer-journalist has (beside the essential mastery of his tools) a strong sense of integrity and the intelligence to understand and present his subject matter accordingly.

W. Eugene Smith

Bill Jay:

I do not believe there is any subject which is off-limits to the photographer. But I do believe that this freedom presupposes a sense of responsibility. An obligation accompanies a right. What I am talking about here is the photographer's moral or ethical sense of right and wrong. Unfortunately this is an aspect of the medium which is rarely discussed but we should emphasize the issue in a separate chapter because it plays a large, but often hidden, part in any viewer's appreciation of a picture.

David Hurn:

*What you are really talking about are pictures of **people**; images of rocks, flower or peeling paint, or any other non-sentient subjects, rarely prompt issues of morality to arise. Although they could. I'm thinking of the sun-bleached cow skull which Arthur Rothstein photographed against two different backgrounds during one of his trips for the Farm Security Administration. As one of them was "fake," it brought into question the validity or veracity of all the agency's images of the dust-bowl era - and the resultant scandal nearly brought down the Roosevelt administration.*

BJ: Nevertheless, pictures of people are most likely to cause offense and question the photographer's ethic. So we should start by explaining the beginnings of the problem.

Photography in general received "good press" throughout the wet-plate era, from the early 1850s to the 1880s. The profession was considered an honorable one; it was useful, enjoyable, and educational. Its applications to both the arts and the sciences were growing, and its public image was held in

high esteem. A growing number of well-bred young ladies was entering the profession which was renowned for its lack of sexual discrimination, its rewarding of social skills, and its encouragement of the Victorian virtues of patience, tact and enterprise. The photographic press never-faillingly upheld the respectability of the profession and berated those individuals, or aspects of the trade, which were inconsistent with good manners and a sense of social responsibility. The wet-plate photographer was generally considered to be a respectable member of society.

This image of respectability was quickly lost, never to be recovered, with the advent of the dry-plate and hand camera.

DH: *Perhaps if we could have the history of photography all over again, we might decide that the conveniences of the instantaneous picture were outweighed by the trouble it caused; we might decide to stay with the cumbersome, messy, inconvenient wet-plate process. But that is a discussion for another occasion. The fact remains that in all the essays and books on the history*

FACES OF MEXICO

A Portfolio

by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. R. Jones', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

R. R. Jones



Fear, Chiapas

In his eyes is reflected not only fear as he looks skyward, but also the gesturing of his friend behind me as he tells of the helicopters, strafings, and the assault vehicles taking the village.

AN INTERVIEW WITH HUNTINGTON WITHERILL

Brooks Jensen:

I first became aware of your work a number of years ago. Quite honestly, I don't remember which gallery I was in now, but it was showing one of your high-key sand dune images. These images have almost become a signature of yours. More recently, I discovered the botanical series that we're publishing in this issue of *LensWork Quarterly*. Obviously, you have your fingers in a lot of different "photographic pies," with a lot of different subject matter. Tell us how you choose your subjects.

Huntington Witherill:

For me, one of the most important things in photography is *light*. I've always approached subject matter as a secondary concern to it. Most of what I have photographed is, of course, subject matter that I'm attracted to. For example, I do a lot of landscape work because I enjoy being outdoors. Initially, I got interested in photography as a kid, taking family camping trips every summer. Although I couldn't articulate it as a child, the light affected me and I was moved by what I saw. I wanted to record it in some fashion. It may be a poor analogy, but a trash can can look quite beautiful if the



light is right. Conversely, Yosemite Valley can look quite bland if the light isn't right. So the light is what defines the photograph more than the subject matter. I've done many different series of photographs which deal with a variety of subjects, but I approach all of them with the same concern for the light and how it reflects off the subject and how it defines the different objects that are being portrayed.

BJ: You've been doing photography for a long time as I recall.

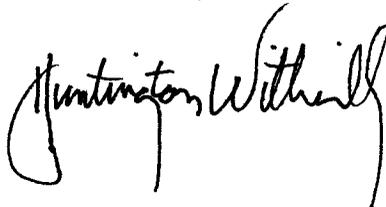
HW: Well, it seems to me a long time, close to thirty years. I started just prior to 1970.

BJ: You have a reputation for being one of the definitive black and white fine art printers. Of course, when you talk about light, you have to admit that it is more than a mono-

BOTANICALS

A Portfolio

by

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Huntington Witherill". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'H' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'l'.

Huntington Witherill

LensWork Publishing is pleased to announce that Huntington Witherill has selected four images from the following pages to be available exclusively in the *LensWork Special Editions Collection*. These images will not be available in any other form other than as *LensWork Special Editions*. Each image is being produced in an exclusive edition limited to 900. The *LensWork Special Editions* images are on pages 75, 76, 87 and 89. For more information, visit our website at www.lenswork.com or see the announcement on page 12 of this issue.



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by David Grant Best

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New from photographer
HUNTINGTON WITHERILL



LWS 074
Adiantum Macrophyllum, 1991
Initialed by Huntington Witherill
\$49, Limited to 900

Witherill has taught in numerous workshop programs and his photographs have been exhibited worldwide. Through special arrangement with the artist, these images are available only as *LensWork Special Editions* and will not be produced in any other format. From the portfolio *Botanicals* in *LensWork Quarterly* #26.

LensWork Exclusives!



LWS 076
Fawn Lilies, 1990
Initialed by Huntington Witherill
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LWS 075
Sitka Columbine, 1997
Initialed by Huntington Witherill
\$49, Limited to 900



LWS 077
Buttercups, 1990
Initialed by Huntington Witherill
\$49, Limited to 900

The LensWork Special Editions Collection

New from photographer
ADAM JAHIEL



LWS 071
Remuda, Spanish Ranch, 1995
Signed by Adam Jahiel
\$49, Limited to 500

In 1992, Jahiel moved from Los Angeles to Story, Wyoming, a tiny town at the base of the Bighorn Mountains. Specializing in photography of the working cowboy, his photographs have been featured in numerous publications and museum exhibits. These *LensWork Special Editions* images were selected from the portfolio *The Last Cowboy*, published in *LensWork Quarterly* #25.



LWS 069
Remuda #1
Signed by Adam Jahiel
\$49, Limited to 500



LWS 073
Riley Cleaver, Winter's Camp, 1994
Signed by Adam Jahiel
\$49, Limited to 500



LWS 072
Part of his string, Stateline Camp, 1992
Signed by Adam Jahiel
\$49, Limited to 500



LWS 070
Rancho Grande
Signed by Adam Jahiel
\$49, Limited to 500

New from photographer **PAUL KENNY**



LWS 065
Leaving - OS 205, 1998
Signed by Paul Kenny
\$49

Originally from Salford, an Industrial town in the Northwest of England, Paul Kenny later moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where he completed his Fine Art Degree in 1975.

Showing his work only since 1991, Kenny recently joined London's prestigious Purdy Hicks Gallery where his stunning nature constructions were exhibited in 1997.

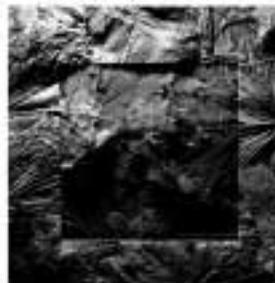


LWS 066
Leaving - Leaf Map #1, 1996
Signed by Paul Kenny
\$49



LWS 067
Leaving - Leaf Circle #2, 1997
Signed by Paul Kenny
\$49

Kenny's work was published in *LensWork Quarterly* #23, his first exposure in North America.



LWS 068
Leaving - Leaf Square #2, 1997
Signed by Paul Kenny
\$49

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Great names and images from the Collection catalog...



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Navigation Without Numbers, 1957
Wynn Bullock
\$99



LWS 019
Child in the Forest, 1951
Wynn Bullock
\$99



LWS 022
Stark Tree, 1956
Wynn Bullock
\$99



LWS 049
Turtle in Church, Alice, Texas
Signed by Dan Burkholder
\$69



LWS 053
Striations and pool reflections, 1998
Initialed by Bruce Barnbaum
\$99



LWS 013
(White Door) 73-150, Eureka, CA
Signed by Oliver Gagliani
\$99



LWS 001
Suspended
Signed by Maureen Gallagher
\$39



LWS 006
Descending Angel
Signed by John Wimberley
\$69



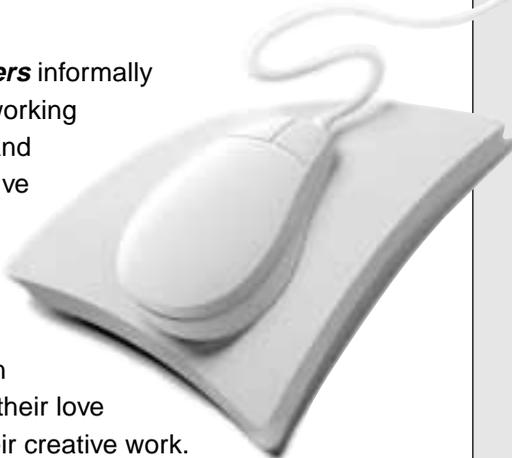
LWS 052
Layers, Antelope Canyon, 1998
Initialed by Bruce Barnbaum
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J. J. Dicker
Empty Rooms

Steve Dzerigian
Human : Nature

Oliver Gagliani
The 1958 Color Portfolio

Phil Harris
Figures: An Alphabet Book

Robert Hecht
Within These Rooms

Steven Katzman
Boot Camp

Paul Kenny
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Lost in America
The Color Portfolio

Alan McGee
Sand

Joan Myers
Santiago

Howard Schatz
Pool Light

Robert Vizzini
Five Hours on the Rock

Larry Wiese
Transition

For a detailed listing and audio preview
www.lenswork.com

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