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LensWork

Photography and the Creative Process · Articles · Interviews · Portfolios

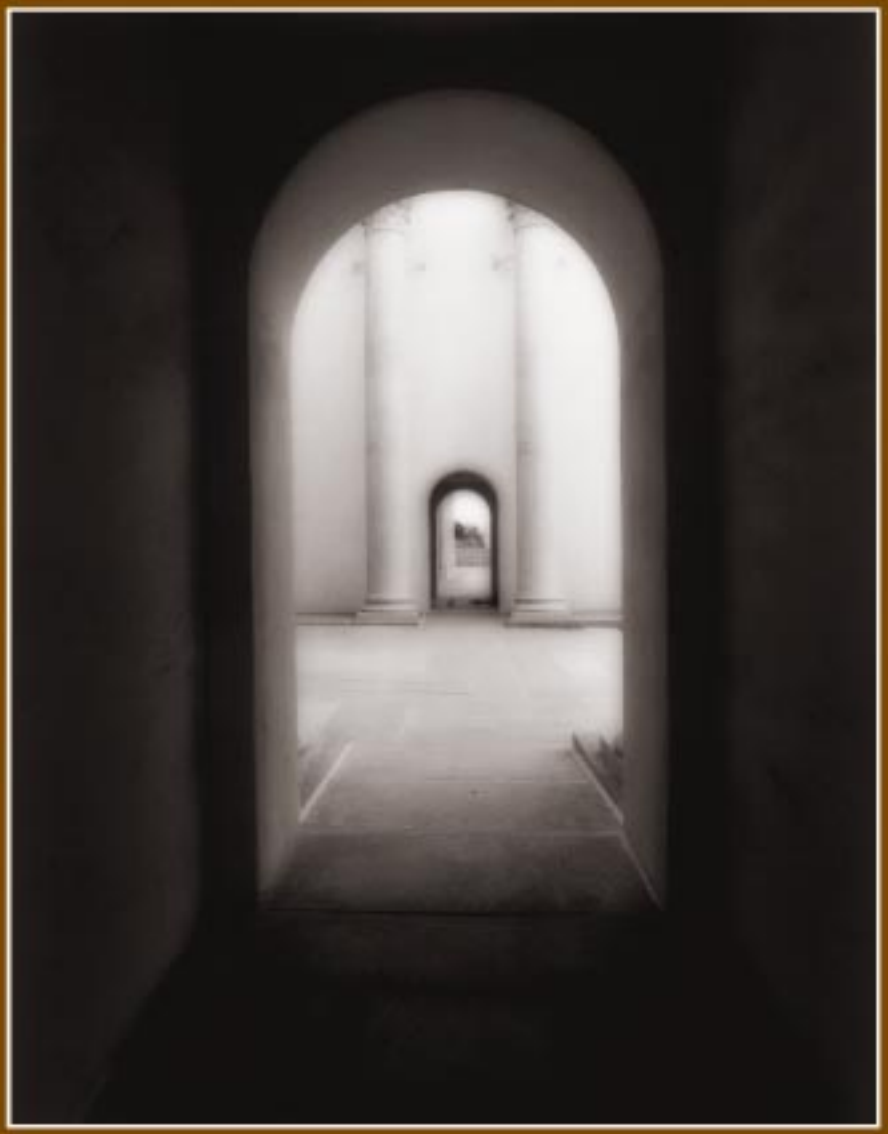
No. 37 Sep - Oct 2001

Article
John Wimberley

Interview
Larry Wiese

Portfolios
Roger Freeman
Brooks Jensen
Larry Wiese

EndNotes
by Bill Jay



LensWork

37
SEP — OCT
2001

Photography and the Creative Process
Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

Editors
Brooks Jensen
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

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John Wimberley

Interview with
Larry Wiese

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Editor's Comments

The Context of the Question

There is a famous story about Edward Weston and his self-image, a story which is apparently true. I've written about this apocryphal story before, but it is worth considering again with a different slant. Weston had been sent a manuscript from a publisher for his approval. The envelope was addressed to "Edward Weston, artist." He is reported to have returned this manuscript to the publisher having crossed off the address line and written in hand above it "Edward Weston, photographer." I have often heard this story told by photographers who use it to demonstrate an unmistakable photographic pride. To do so, however, is to miss an important point – the power of the definition to (of all things!) *define*.

One of the root axioms of science is that the context of the question is the single most influential factor in determining the answer. Change the context of the question and the answer can change dramatically. For example, *What is the smallest particle of matter?* Scientists spent centuries looking for the smallest particle they could see, breaking rocks into sand, sand into molecules, molecules into atoms, atoms into subatomic particles. As it turns out, the smallest particle isn't even a particle. It's more like a wave than a solid. It's not a thing; it's an *event*. But it took us such a long time to realize this and when Einstein proposed that energy and matter are two forms of the same thing it *shocked* the scientific world. He changed the context of the question and science has been reeling from the implications in his answer ever since.

Back in the 1950s psychologist Maxwell Maltz created the study of a branch of psychology known as psycho-cybernetics. Common sense tells us that what we see determines what we think. His basic idea was that this is exactly backwards – that our thoughts determine what we see and how we act. His primary conclusion was that our definition of our self-image is the most powerful determinant in our behavior. "As a man thinketh, so is he." Today this may not seem like a particularly revolutionary idea, but the consequences for photographers are profound.

Consider Edward Weston's position more carefully. Because he perceived himself as a "photographer" rather than an "artist" he defined his medium so tightly as

to exclude non-photographic processes. For example, he eliminated from the realm of the possible such creative areas as hand-coloring, the marriage of image and text, or even chemical processes that don't use the camera. Of course, he may have done this purposely and with strategic conviction. Even in his *Daybooks* he is mute on this.

Don't misunderstand me. There's nothing fundamentally *wrong* with self-limiting definitions. This is, after all, the world of art in which almost any methodology can be valid. That Weston chose to define himself a certain way creating straight photographic images is not a problem – but it might have been a *limitation*. It's this limitation that deserves some attention. Purposeful limitations can be useful. Thoughtless ones might be quite stifling to the creative life.

All of this was brought to mind when I was attending the last Houston FotoFest. As a reviewer, I had the opportunity to examine numerous portfolios and meet the photographers. The review session with each photographer would often begin with exchanging pleasantries and business cards. I was amazed how many photographers presented me with a business card that defined their *style* of photography! I met numerous people with cards that announced their specialty:

John Smith
Black and White
Landscape Photographer

Are these *marketing descriptions* or *self-image definitions*? This is a subtle difference, but a crucial one. I met photographers who defined themselves as a "Cibachrome photographer," a "Panorama Photographer," and even one photographer who announced herself as a "Black and White Women's Issues Portraitist" – I am not kidding! If Maltz' psycho-cybernetics ideas are at all valid, such definitions lead to an extremely narrow arena of work. It seems important to be a specialist these days, but can become a little silly when it so defines one's options as to create a box of rigid and miniscule proportions.

I thought a great deal about it during the several days of the conference. I finally began to understand why photographers choose to define themselves this way when I was presented with a biography/resumé from a photographer who defined himself as a "Large Format Photographer." Question: what does this moniker define? His physical appearance? The size of his exhibition photographs? His camera? Or was it defining a certain approach and relationship to subject matter? As I brought into mind this image of "Large Format Photographer," I immediately realized it included a whole range

of issues in the creation of his artwork – the format of his photographs, a certain style of presentation, arctic-white-and-God-help-us-if-it's-any-other-color mat boards, a methodology, a state of mind, a deliberate, solitary and even meditative technique – often in the pristine landscape. As we talked about his vision and his creative drive and re-examined the photographs in his portfolio, it became more clear to both of us that his *style* of using the camera was working *against* his creative vision. His ideas and vision were animated, alive, asymmetrical, and colorful. His images tended to be static, symmetrical, centered – using that all-too-common "bull's-eye composition" that is seen so often in tripod-based photography. Furthermore, he repeated a well-defined tonal scale in all of his photographs that tended to make metallic surfaces glow, and make all organic materials look metallic. His photographs were technically well-executed, but passionless. He was frustrated with this and became aware, as we talked, that the context of his definition of *who and what he was* had completely dominated his photographic answers. He was a Large Format Photographer and therefore used a large format camera. In fact, it was the only camera he owned.

I proposed that he consider letting go of the idea of being a *photographer* and embrace the idea of being an *artist.* Suddenly a number of creative ideas could be considered: images with text, images presented in other than in arctic-white museum mat boards, multimedia presentations, and possibly some experimentation with three-dimensional presentations – and perhaps, God forbid, handheld color 35mm abstracts! As long as he defined himself as a *large format photographer,* these ideas could not be remotely considered, not even as a safe, unrealized fantasy. If a human were given the gift of wings, flight would still be psychologically difficult until we changed our fear of gravity. The concept of considering artistic ideas that were so diametrically opposed to his large format prejudice were psychologically inconceivable. They didn't fit the definition of what he was *supposed* to be doing artistically. But, I suggested, if he could change the definition of his artwork he might be able to change his limitations easily. Or, as G. K. Chesterton said, "The angels fly because they take themselves lightly!"

This is a double-edged sword, of course. One of the chief reasons to squeeze things in life is to intensify the experience. With Weston, by limiting himself to a narrow range of presentation and media he forced himself to think in extremely creative ways within those limitations. In spite of his reluctance to be called an artist, he was a *great* artist precisely because of this

intensity in his vision and execution. Had he allowed himself unrestricted freedom, he may not have produced such an interesting body of work. We will never know.

The point here is that each of us, individually, need to think clearly and commit ourselves to a strategy *with intention*. Be a large format photographer because you intend to use this limited definition as a *strategic tool* on your creative path. If it is a tool, you can use it with discrimination and abandon it at will. If, on the other hand, it is an inflexible task master with inflexible rules of what you may and may not do creatively, it can be far worse than a nuisance. Conscious *choice* is the key. Sometimes, it can be a great exercise to produce a portfolio of, say, ten images in one tightly defined weekend. (Nothing like a deadline!) Sometimes it's much more productive to allow a more liberal, free-floating, experimental and even boundless definition. Part of creative wisdom is knowing when to squeeze and when to let go. The first step to developing this skill is to recognize that this strategy needs to be a conscious one. Whether one tightens controls or loosens control is not the question. But rather, it is whether one loosens control *when it's important to do so* and tightens control *when it's important to do so* that really counts.

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LPG-010

Trees, Irvine, CA 1997
by Larry Wiese

The Minor Leagues

by

Roger Freeman

Dealing With Dealers

The Elephant in the Gallery

by

John Wimberley

For those of us who have been working at photography most of our life, it's no secret that the art-photography gallery scene is fraught with dysfunction. For those of you who are yet to consider this entanglement, it is with the wisdom of experience that I encourage you to choose these art partners with the greatest of care.

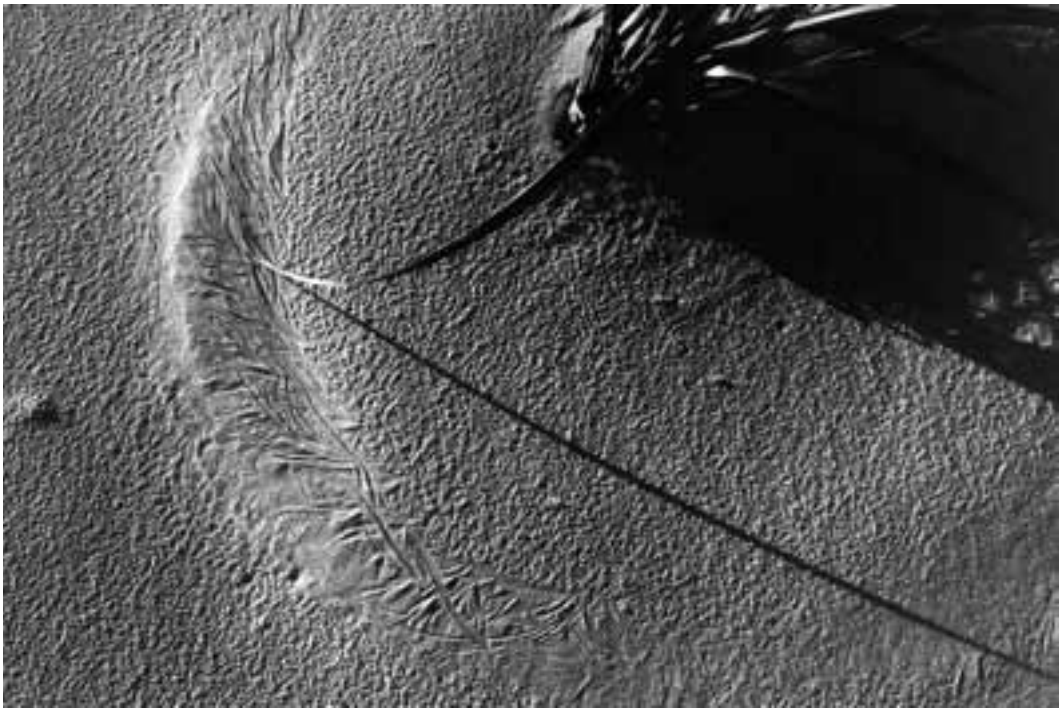
Photographers have typically been in denial about the extent of the problems inherent in selling through dealers. Perhaps we are intimidated by their power in the contemporary art market – and fear their wrath! After all, they have a virtual monopoly on opportunities for exhibitions and sales. And given the common misuse of that monopoly, the situation calls for immediate change: it is time for photographers to wake up and create new and better venues for selling their work.

Until the late 1960's, photographers who wanted to sell original prints generally did so by personal contact with collectors. Galleries were few; the day of the "photography gallery" was still in the future. Those galleries that did sell photography usually sold other forms of visual art as well. For the most part, photographers sold their prints directly, and kept the entire sales price for themselves. It's important to remember that when Edward Weston sold a print for $15 it was *his* $15. Had he sold the print through a gallery, he would have had to

Gestures of a Primitive Mind

by

Brooks Jensen



Interview with Larry Wiese

Brooks Jensen: Your work is very different, very interesting. You've obviously developed your own style and look. Tell us a bit about yourself and your relationship to photography and the creative path you've traveled.

Larry Wiese: Well, I started photography like many people – more or less taking picture of the kids and so on. And as years passed, it became more and more a way to communicate artistically. For many years, I spent a lot of time doing traditional landscape photography and was very satisfied with that. But then, about seven or eight years ago, I had an interesting experience that changed everything. I showed a portfolio of this work to a gallery director in Los Angeles. Halfway through the interview, the gallery director asked me if I was feeling ill. Apparently I had turned red and I was flushed and sweating. All of a sudden I said, "Look, this isn't working. I think we'd better do this another time." I threw everything in the portfolio box and beat a hasty retreat. That was the start of a long, long journey for me. Looking back at it, I think I had an anxiety attack. I was looking at the work and realized *it was not really me*, not really what I was about. From that experience, I started a personal evaluation trying to find out exactly *Why was I doing what I was doing*? and *Why was it important to me?*

PORTFOLIO

by

Larry Wiese

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