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"I just wanted to write and say "Thank You" for producing a magazine of **such high quality.** The May-June issue was the second issue of Lenswork that I had purchased and once again **no word has gone unread.** I am new to the world of Photographic Art and Photography but the insight that I get from the pages of *LensWork*, both written and visual far exceed the price of purchase. Thank you once again!" -- *Jason Gray*



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"I have been a subscriber for a while now and have to tell you **how starved the photography community would be without your publication.** I am so very happy you are no longer quarterly. I have only one wish for you, and I mean this in a good way. May you never enjoy broad commercial appeal." -- *Marc Climie*

"This 'preview' is a delightfully tantalizing treat, one which certainly brightened up my morning. On the other hand, it's cruel torture - now I've got to **race frantically out to the mailbox, day after day, eagerly hoping that the next issue of your excellent magazine will be waiting there ready to be devoured,** only to be disappointed by 'regular' mail. If you were trying to show just enough of the magazine to drive viewers into a frenzy to see the whole issue, well, you've succeeded. Thanks for putting out such a fine magazine." -- *Paul Butzi*

"I REALLY LIKE YOUR MAGAZINE! I **love to read the in-depth interviews,** and to hear what others are doing and thinking. It brings so much more to the field of photography when you can understand where someone is coming from. I also **enjoy the connection back to other arts.** After all, we do all speak a similar language and have common concerns when it comes to being creative." -- *Jim Graham.*

"Thanks. We are enjoying both the photography and commentary in *LensWork* - **thought-provoking and like having another congenial colleague** offering new thoughts and insights." -- *Ed and Dorothy Monnelly*

"Just finished looking through / reading *LensWork* No. 32. I wanted to say what a great publication you have here. **Thought-provoking editorials, thorough interviews, and splendid portfolios.**" -- *Miles Budimir*

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LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

No. 39 Feb - Mar 2002

Articles

David L. Smith
Frank Van Riper

Portfolios

Peter Adams
David L. Smith
Bill Zorn

EndNotes
by Bill Jay



LENSWORK

39
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Photography and the Creative Process
Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

Editors

Brooks Jensen
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

Articles by

David L. Smith
Frank Van Riper

Interviews with

Alfred Eisenstaedt
Arnold Newman

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS



Beyond What It Is

“Never discuss religion or politics,” the old maxim says. What the heck, let’s break the rules.

All religions have two distinct sets of teachings – the *exoteric* and the *esoteric*. The **exoteric** teachings are the highly visible ones understandable by the masses, taught from the pulpit of every neighborhood church. The **esoteric** teachings are the subtle ones – the ones known by the mystics, the masters and the deepest thinkers. And sometimes by the artists.

Photography is similar. There is an exoteric version and an esoteric one. For the purposes of illustration only, it’s useful to think about the exoteric and the esoteric at opposite ends of the same line. If we place the exoteric on the far left (e.g., the product catalog photo) then what kind of photography exists at the esoteric end of the line? This is an important question – particularly for many creative artists because we tend so often to focus on the esoteric, that is, the deep and significant image that is supposed to go beyond mere photographic recording. But *what is it?* This is not an academic question. Think

of it this way: *What is it that makes your artwork meaningful?*

There is an old photographic maxim that goes, “If you can’t make a *great* photograph of a *mundane* subject, at least make a *mundane* photograph of a *great* subject!” But often this leads in practice to *mere reproduction* of, in this example, Nature’s splendor. (As a friend of mine says each time he sets up his tripod at this moment, “Ain’t Nature grand!”) They are still *exoteric* photographs in that they are *photographs about the objects in front of the camera lens*. When a photograph is used to simply show what something looks like at a particular place and at a particular time it serves primarily as a *memory device*. It either reminds us of that which we’ve already seen, or shows us something new we will need to remember later. When the need arises, it’s useful to be able to remember a recipe, a phone number, or the formula for computing the area of a circle. But such statistics and data do not make our life more *meaningful*, they simply make it *easier*.

When photography goes beyond merely showing us what something looked like

and starts, instead, to show us something of what it *is* like, in its deepest soul, then it approaches the esoteric. An argument could be successfully made that this is *exactly* what Ansel Adams' photographs do, even though on the surface they might look simply like pretty pictures of a pretty place. They are more. He showed us Yosemite's *soul*, not merely its rocks. (Or at the very least he showed us the Yosemite we'd all like to believe in – which says something about *our* soul!)

Edward Weston talked about photographing “the thing itself”; Minor White told his photography students “Don't photograph simply what it *is*, rather photograph what *else* it is.” The esoteric image shows us the subject matter in a relationship of significance, shows us that the subject is worthy of noticing, or perhaps the photograph opens some door to perception, understanding, or insight that was previously closed to us.

Simply put, the importance of the exoteric photograph is the world *outside you*; the importance of the esoteric photograph is the world *inside you and inside the subject*. (This completes the course in post-post-modernism in art.)

But there is quicksand here that brings me to the central point of my comments. Too many budding artists, when they discover this line of thinking, then conclude

that the best esoteric (read *inner*) photography is somehow the most *personal* – and the subsequent photographs suffer. (Or more properly said, those of us who must *look* at these photographs suffer!)

The problem with most inner-driven photographs is that they are incredibly self-indulgent and self-referencing. They are a closed circle with no outside reference, no point of entry. As I write this in the first year of the new millennium, we are in the midst of an insignificant phase in the history of photography in which self-indulgent photographs are all the rage. Everyone seems to think they need psychotherapy and are using photography as a means of self-exploration, self-analysis, and self-cleansing, and then these images are thrust on an unsuspecting public, who is told by stupid art critics that this work is significant and meaningful. (Breathe!) In truth, these photographs *are* significant, but *only to the individual who created them as therapy*.

To the rest of us, such images are merely *a look at the other person's therapy*. More often than not – far, far more often than not – these are boring photographs by good people, with good intentions but misdirected creativity.

Well, if the most esoteric photograph is not the most self-directed, then what is it? The answer to this question has been answered the same way throughout

history. Simply said, the creation of art passes into a different plane when it ceases to be focused on *self* and instead starts focusing on *Self*. Which brings me back to religion.

It makes no difference whether you consider *Self* to be The Great Oneness of All Beings, God, or Buddha, or Nature, or (to quote G. K. Chesterton) “the which than which there is no whicher.” When the subject of art becomes bigger than oneself, when the subject becomes the Universal *Self* (I’ll use this as a catch-all phrase for God) or at least the universal self (that which we all share in our more earthly existence) it becomes a much better thing. This is not to say photography must be about religious themes, but it is always better when it is infused with a *universal component* which allows the audience entrance into the image through their ability to internalize or personally relate to the subject. I love Ansel Adams’ photograph of Yosemite from the Wawona turnout not because I see *him* standing there, but because I can see Yosemite as though *I* was standing there. His photographs succeed because every one of us can see ourselves looking through his eyes. In order to do this, he developed the skill *to see through ours*.

It is an elusive challenge in photography, but it is not impossible. Edward Weston captured it with his shells, his peppers,

and his dead pelicans. André Kertész captured it in a single vase and flower in *Chez Mondrian* and Alfred Eisenstaedt captured it in *Kiss, V-J Day, 1945*. In all such photographs there is a *universality* that is testament to the old wisdom, “Do not speak unless spoken *through*.”

As far back as ancient Greece, artists have talked about the muse or the daemon that speaks *through* the artist to all mankind. I suspect that before the world of electronics, the world was a quieter place and the muse was more easily heard. Nowadays, most artists have to work very hard just to catch a whisper, a hint, or even just a wink from the muse. How does the subject want to be photographed? What is The Universe trying to say through you with this image? Can you see this image you are about to make through the eyes of the rest of humanity? What will they see and will it make a difference? Can you photograph your subject through other’s eyes?

The difficulty with these questions – other than the obvious risk of over-analyzing your work while you’re photographing – is the necessary sense of *letting go of control*. It is not about what you see; it is not about what you feel. If this is all it is about, then your photographs will be of interest only to you. Can you let go of yourself and let your subject speak directly to your audience?

In Japan it is said that an individual who has complete control of his medium is not quite a master. The true master is one who, indeed, has total control *and then lets go and allows an accident to happen*. In Zen they talk about painting with *mu-shin* which means “no mind.” This does not mean merely *thoughtless* painting, but rather letting go of forcing it, controlling it with an act of personal will. Great artists can do this. Examples are found in the paintings of Mark Tobey, the photographs of Brett Weston, the calligraphy of Sengai, or even the dialogs of Mark Twain. Every writer knows there is a point at which the characters take over the plot and the task of writing changes from one of creation to one of observation. If you want to become a better photographer, become a more practiced observer and then get out of your way.

If you can find it, take a careful look at a book by Christian Vogt titled *In Camera*. In a studio, photographer Vogt placed a large square wooden box and asked a series of women to come and pose with the box for him in any way they chose. He let go of control. He made no suggestions. There were no limitations. His job was to simply record what these women chose to show of themselves. It’s one of the most fascinating studies of psychology and personal expression I’ve ever seen. It’s also a wonderful photographic portfolio.

Another classic example in observing and listening are the still life photographs of Josef Sudek. He created an entire body of work consisting of photographs of what one can’t help suspect was his simple lunch — an egg, a glass of water, and a crumbled tissue around a slice of cheese. They are wonderful photographs. It’s easy to see him sitting down to this simple lunch when suddenly – a moment of revelation! The light, the shapes, the shadows! Lunch is forgotten and a wonderful photograph is made. My vision of how Sudek’s photographs were created may be total fantasy. But for me, the pictures are more than mere eggs, mere cheese and a mere glass of water. Instead, they have a movement and rhythm and story to them that makes them successful – not just as mere images, but as a connection directly to Sudek and his experience.

A photograph that merely shows me what an egg looks like would be boring. What makes these photographs succeed is that they are not pictures of eggs. They are pictures of a *moment* – whether one of cosmic revelation or one of simply enjoying a meal. He listened and his muse spoke.

Listening, seeing, going beyond the limits of subject and photographing the universal – *that* is the path of the artist.



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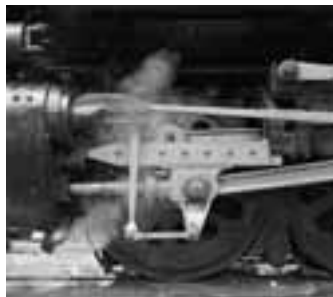
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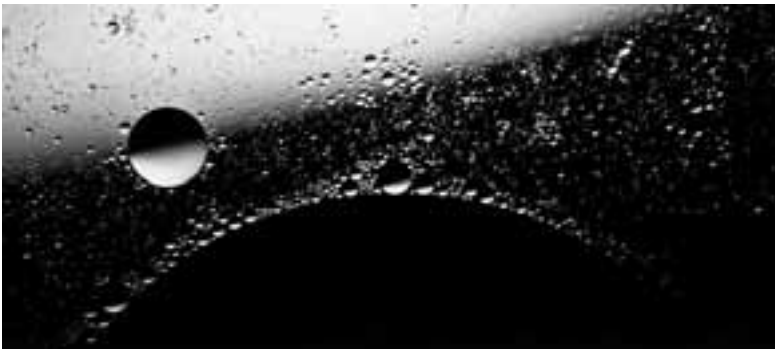
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GRADATIONS & GEOMETRIES



by

David L. Smith

David L. Smith





THE AESTHETIC URGE

by

David L. Smith

[Editor's Note: *This article accompanies the portfolio entitled Gradations & Geometries on the previous pages in this issue.*]

In 1963 I made three formative decisions: one was a big mistake; the other two turned out to be blessings. All were because of Ansel Adams; more precisely, his photographs. He came as a guest to our class at RIT, bringing about a dozen mounted but unmatted and unframed 16x20 prints. One at a time, he set out each one for us to see. I'd worked as a technician for a large commercial studio, so I was accustomed to seeing high quality photographs. But when I got close to Adams' prints, I was in awe! My response to his prints was one that I was totally unprepared for. *They startled my soul.*

Within seconds of displaying his first print, we huddled in to get closer. Gratefully, at his invitation, we took turns scrutinizing them. Up close or far back, those photographs had a magnetism. They drew us in. They weren't just pictures – representations of boulder fields, cemeteries, trees, and valleys. They had *context*, a reference sensibility that was tangible. I could *feel* the reverence he had for his subjects. They directed my attention to the immense time-depth, and the power of the natural forces revealed in them. They evoked a sense of the present moment: the tree in this moment, the stream in that moment, never



CHINA'S YANGTZE

Ancient Heritage, River Rising



by

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Zorn'.

Bill Zorn





GREATNESS IS BEING GOOD

Consistently

by

Frank Van Riper

"It is not difficult to be great occasionally; the real challenge is to be good consistently."

I would like to claim authorship, but in fact this thought was voiced by a photographer who arguably has been great consistently, or at least very, very good very, very often.

Several years ago while viewing a museum show of his work, Richard Avedon was quickly surrounded by admirers and made this comment. A friend who happened to be at the show overheard it and relayed it to Judy and me over dinner. Given the setting where Avedon spoke (a museum show) the surroundings (a crowd of mostly young fans) and the fact that Avedon is in his 70's (b.1923) one might view his aphorism as merely an avuncular bromide tossed off with Oscar Wilde-like brio by one of photography's Senior Fellows.

But in fact Avedon's comment goes to the heart of what it means to be an artist: of the camera, the pen, the piano, the scalpel, the kitchen – anything in the long catalog of human endeavor. At what point can a weekend painter call him or herself an artist? When does the casual photographer earn the same description? Does having an unfinished novel



Introducing a new feature in LensWork

A FEW OF THE LEGENDS

Portraits and Profiles of Photographers

by

Peter Adams

Editor's note: With this portfolio, we are delighted to introduce a new feature in LensWork entitled A Few of the Legends by Peter Adams. In future issues of LensWork, we'll feature select profiles from the hundreds of well-known photographers Peter Adams has photographed and interviewed in his decades-long project. These witty and insightful – and sometimes poignant – profiles offer a glimpse into the creative life of some of the most famous, most published, most iconoclastic, most outrageous and most emulated photographers of the recent generations.



“Retire? Retire from what. Life? I will only retire when I am dead and people will say “That’s the man who shot that picture of the sailor and the nurse on VJ Day!””

Alfred Eisenstaedt

Peter Adams: The streets of New York were bloody cold on the 14th January, 1992, as I made my way across 42nd Street and up 6th Avenue, struggling into a wind chill factor of 10, with a heavy camera case and tripod.

The pavement slippery from layers of grey slush – frozen each night and partially thawed the next day – and edged with gutters brim full of sluggish rivers of grubby ice. More than once my feet adopted the mindset of Michael Flatley and attempted to slide back the way we had come.

Automatic glass doors at the Time-Life building slid back to blast me with a wall of hot house air mingled with cheap perfume and non-functioning deodorant and echoes from voices resounding off the polished marble floors and walls.

Alfred Eisenstaedt at the age of 93 still had an office there and still worked four days a week – a testimony both to him and the magazine he worked for nearly sixty years. It was there we met – in a small windowless room on the nineteenth floor, 12x12 feet, lined with cardboard boxes of prints and memories and autographed with the names of the glitterati he photographed.

“Eisie” – as everyone bar the doorman called him – found walking a problem, but his mind was as sharp and the twinkle in his eyes never dimmed for a moment.

Alfred Eisenstaedt: In 1916 I was drafted into the German army. At Verdun, shrapnel ripped into my legs – and most of my other bits got frostbitten! At the moment I fell backwards, I remember looking at my watch – it was 4:10pm – and thinking that, for me at least, the war was over.

I was the only survivor of my battery. I was 16.

In 1935, I emigrated to America to work for Henry Luce who was co-creating an editorial picture magazine – called Magazine X, later to become *Life*. The first issue came out in November ‘36 and, as it turned out, I ended up working for *Life* for the next 57 years! The first cover was by Margaret Bourke White, but I had the second – and 60 covers altogether.

When *Life* was first published, television didn’t exist, so for twenty years we were the only magazine which told the world what ‘life’ was all about. In ‘36 Henry Luce wrote about *Life*:

To see life; to see the world; to eye-witness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things – machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work – his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles

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