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No. 27 • Nov 1999 - Jan 2000



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Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

QUARTERLY



Essay
Bill Jay

Portfolios
David Grant Best
Frank Dienst

Interview & Portfolio
Shelby Lee Adams

LENSWORK

Q U A R T E R L Y



Photography and the Creative Process
Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

No. 27

Nov 1999—Jan 2000

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With the release of his second book, *Appalachian Legacy*, Adams mines deeper into the heart of these people — *his* people. Our editor enjoys the opportunity to speak with a photographic artist who clearly understands commitment to a subject, and is rewarded with a depth in his work that is a rare find in photography.

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Appalachian Portraits: Two Families

***The Napier Family
Brice & Crow***



Photo credit: Marcia Boxman

Morrie Camhi

August 16, 1928 – August 27, 1999

*“We do not see things as *they* are ...
We see things as *we* are.”*

Morrie Camhi passed away at his home in Petaluma, California, at the age of 71. To those who knew him, Morrie will be remembered as one of those Great Human Beings who connected compassionately with people of broad cultural and social status. A wonderful storyteller who delivered a world-class hug, he improved the quality of life for those fortunate to be in his good company. Photography was elevated by his use of the camera, and the photographic community will truly miss one its best artists and diplomats.

Memorial contributions may be sent to:
Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Avenue, Montgomery, AL 36104, or to
The Morrie Camhi Photography Award, c/o CAMHI, 95 Marshall Avenue, Petaluma, CA 94952.



EDITOR'S COMMENTS



More Thoughts On Creativity and Confusion

2nd Movement, Adagio Trans Allegro

First, thanks for all of your feedback and support for my rather rigid stand on “bad art” as discussed in my last Editor’s Comments. I didn’t realize my frustrations were shared by so many. Since some of you may not have seen the last issue’s Comments, I’d like to beg your indulgence and continue that discussion based on a couple of E-mails I received.

In particular, I received an E-mail supporting my stand on “bad art,” but questioning my convictions. The writer criticized us for publishing in the same issue [#26] the “out of focus,” dark and blurry images by James Whitlow Delano in his portfolio *Japan: Living In Two Worlds*. He wrote:

When did “out of focus” or “image motion” become artsy?? Could you please enlighten me regarding the image on page 22?? I somehow have missed the art and ‘vision’ in that photograph as well. You asked us to take a stand, and by golly that’s just what I’m doing. I take you at your word ... and

believe I have the responsibility to tell you I think most of the images chosen to show this man’s work would be considered ‘substandard photography’ in any beginner’s class. Surely he has images that show more fairly his quality as a photographer and artist!

The key statement in my Editor’s Comments is at the beginning of the third paragraph — “... creative vision is almost never a mess. Instead, it is a clarification of what could not be seen so easily without it.” Take another look at Delano’s work with this idea in mind.

I have been to Japan numerous times. It is not the country we think of in idyllic terms — quiet gardens, unobstructed views of Mt. Fuji, and quaint photogenic people in curious clothes. This Japan may still exist in glimpses, but today’s Japan is much closer to Delano’s photographs. In fact, if you want to know Japan as it really is today, look at his images and you will

see it. Today's Japan *is* "out of focus" because one must look at it on the run. If you were to try to stop on a street in downtown Tokyo and attempt to use a large format camera and tripod, you would be run over. Moreover it would likely get you arrested for impeding the rush!

It is even more important to understand that the Japanese are a people of glances. They would never *dream* of looking you right in the eye. Here in the West, we might think this is caused by embarrassment or shyness. It is not. In their culture, only an interrogating policeman would dare look a person directly in the eye — and only if that person was suspected of the most heinous crime! The image on page 22 (as well as on the facing page 23, and 25 and 26) are *so* Japanese. This is the only way to make eye contact — fleetingly, with a glance, stolen in the flash of an instant. This partially explains (I believe) the Japanese fascination with cameras. They have no hesitation to stare a camera down. In fact, this is the only way to really see what another person looks like — look at a picture of them! To our sensibilities, how strange!

Japan is a dark country in love with shadows. A room with a bright light is either an office or an offense. The Japanese

would much prefer a room with many small and dim sources of light than a single fixture, hung from the ceiling, glaring from two or three 100-watt bulbs, as is so common here in America. Typically, they will have 25-watt bulbs shielded behind a translucent plastic or paper shade. They have a mindset of economy in everything they do — and this is exemplified by their use of light. They only light what needs to be seen and the rest is left to the shadows. Their literature is legendary on this point.

Put all of this together and you can see that Delano's view of Japan is quite illuminating (no pun intended). He shows us Japan as it *is*, not as it is fantasized about by Westerners. One of the interesting tasks of photography is to do just that. I can appreciate Ansel Adams' crystal sharp view of Yosemite, but, if you have ever been there, you will agree that his view is a fiction. Anyone's vacation snapshots of Yosemite are a more accurate memory for the average tourist! Or compare Adams' images to Ted Orland's hand-colored, hand-camera snaps of the park. Which is better photography? They both are, in my opinion, appropriate. It would be a mistake to conclude that Adams' view is more correct because it is *sharper*. Adams' and Orland's are not better or worse; they are just *different*.

There seems to be a prejudice among many photographers that a “good photograph” is one that:

- is crystal sharp;
- accurately reproduces the visual tonal scale;
- is carefully composed with graphic harmony;

and therefore made with a large negative, probably a view camera, and employing the Zone System for control, *control*, **control**. I would make a case that this view of the world is, indeed, accurate — just not all the time. Sometimes (and Delano illustrates this perfectly) the world is anything *but* controlled.

This is where my comments in the last editorial about *mess* come into play. Many people would look at a body of work like Delano’s and assume that it is easy to create and requires little skill. People say this about Henri Cartier-Bresson’s, too. That is, until they try to do it. I cannot paint like Pablo Picasso, but his paintings lead me to think that I could! Delano’s work, like Cartier-Bresson’s and Picasso’s is a clarification, a distillation, and even a simplification of the real world before them. This requires great skill, impeccable timing, and most important a clear eye that can see the world without the mental filters that rearrange what is before us into a more palatable fiction consistent with our preconceived notions.

There is a trick to looking at such work. As viewers, we must be willing — at least for a few moments — to suspend our judgment about what a photograph is *supposed* to look like. We must also shelve our preconceived notions about the subject matter. We must be willing to give the photographer (and, perhaps, the editor!) the benefit of the doubt and look at the work with the assumption that there is something to see that is worthy of our attention. What is the photographer trying to show us? Did the message come through? Did they create the work skillfully? Is the message clarified by their photographs?

I believe these are important skills to cultivate for those of us in photography. Otherwise, we run the risk of restricting our assessment of other photographers by one very limiting criteria — *is their photographic approach similar to mine? Or, does it fit my preconceived notions about what a photograph is supposed to look like?* Such a narrow view will limit one’s appreciation of photography to the work of a very small circle of like-minded individuals.

Finally, let me say that we chose to publish Delano’s work because we think it is one of the very best portfolios of this genre we have seen. We’ve reviewed dozens of portfolios of out-of-focus and dark “street photography” and almost all of them are

not worth a second glance. Far too many of these photographers end up creating a mess that cannot be deciphered because their work is confusing and inconsistent. Delano's work is clear and precise, in spite of the fact that his camera isn't!

What makes this issue so thorny is the ease with which the pendulum can swing. *All good photographs ought to look like this.* Or its opposite: *every photograph is artistic and virtuous and there are no bad photographs.* Neither of these extremes is true. So what criteria should we use? Thorny, indeed.

I can't offer a definitive answer, but I will offer these ideas:

- Edward Weston said, "Good composition is the strongest way of seeing."
- Kodak has published, "A good photograph is one that makes the viewer so aware of the subject that they are unaware of the print."
- This is why *visual literacy* is important.
- Most people intuitively know the difference between junk and genius when they see it.

We live in the age of *symbolism* — some say at the expense of *substance*. Here, too, we come up against the prickly issue of good versus bad photography. In this issue of *LensWork Quarterly* you will find

a portfolio of two Appalachian families by Shelby Lee Adams. These are wonderful photographs, created by a man whose compassion and love for his subjects are beyond question. He grew up in the very hollows where these photographs were made, and has known many of these people all his life. But, how do *you* see these people? Ask yourself this question: when you first see the photographs, what is your immediate, reflex response? Do you see them as the stereotypes that Hollywood has presented them as? If so, then you are not seeing the photographs; you are seeing the images through a filter of the symbolism and preconceived notions you bring with you to Adams' art. Read the text of his books, *Appalachian Portraits* and *Appalachian Legacy*, and our interview with him, and you'll see the images more easily without the filters that predetermine the impression you may have had otherwise.

Looking at art is an act that demands responsibility from the viewer. It is necessary to allow the artist to communicate directly, bypassing the filters of prejudice and preconceptions — at least temporarily. If the artwork is good, it might have a chance of "opening your eyes" — a result that may change your ways of thinking, or reinforce what you already believe. If the artwork is bad, it will probably just fail to communicate,

period. Either way, you can always put your filters back on!

This leads us to two conclusions that define the tragedy of so much art in our times. The bad art fails because it is empty. The good art often (but not always) fails because it does not harmonize with our preconceived ideas. It doesn't "look like a picture is supposed to" so we don't give it a chance.

I believe this dilemma exists for a simple reason: we are woefully uneducated. If we are ignorant about art, then the charlatans can bamboozle us with their piffle. What viewer will question "piffle art" when they cannot take a stand based on secure and self-confident *knowledge*? On the other hand, if we are ignorant and limited to shallow symbolism and clichés, then potentially meaningful art is relegated to the junk heap because it doesn't fit the prescribed norms. What viewer will resist the authority of common opinion when it damns a photograph that goes blatantly against the norm? The *zeitgeist* (a German word for the intellectual, moral and cultural spirit of the times) in art is a powerful persuader that can intimidate the naïve into acceptance or rejection of art simply because it doesn't fit the prevailing mold.

When the educated person *knows* that $2+2=4$, then no charlatan or no popular rule can persuade them that $2+2=5$. To be involved in the art world requires that we accept the responsibility to be educated about what we see. I've advocated for years that all photographers should take a course in art history, or at least read and study H. W. Janson's *History of Art*. To have art in our world requires that we understand the importance of such education. It is not by accident that an artist who picks up an older camera usually makes better photographs than an accountant or lawyer with a brand new one. The Zone System is a useful tool, but I would rather see more photographers studying painting or graphic design on the side.

Oliver Gagliani, now 82 years old [see *LensWork Quarterly* #18 for a portfolio of his work], made an interesting observation last month when I spoke with him. He was lamenting that art education is so lacking now, in spite of our fantastic economic prosperity at the end of the 20th century. "Back when I was growing up, nobody had any money, but we all knew about art and music. We'd go to the museums and musicians would come to the schools. We all played instruments and took lessons and everybody knew who Beethoven and Rembrandt were.

Now everybody has money but there is no room for art classes in the schools!"

He has a point. If we haven't been taught to appreciate art in our formal schooling, we owe it both to ourselves and to the artists whose work we see to educate ourselves. The broader perspectives learned in that effort can help us make better sense of the creative work presented to us by other artists. Both James Whitlow Delano (from the last issue of *LensWork Quarterly*) and Shelby Lee Adams (in this issue, see page 63) challenge our preconceived ideas of photography, while simultaneously showing us a fascinating and personal look at the world in which they live. I, for one, never tire of seeing through such creative eyes as theirs.



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Black Crocs, 1995
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Dianne Kornberg, from Portland, Oregon, has been working on an extended project photographing bones and scientific artifacts for over 20 years. Her work is wide-ranging, presented as series of uniquely composed still life constructions. There is a grace and poignancy to these quiet images that make them accessible and fascinating.

LensWork is delighted to announce that a collection of eight of her most interesting and collected pieces are now available in the *LensWork Special Editions Collection*. We present four of them here. (See our complete catalog for the full listing.)

Kornberg's work was published in *LensWork Quarterly* #16, her first international exposure for the portfolio *Jack in the Box*. From that portfolio, the image on page 37 is also available in the *Special Editions Collection*.



LWS 032
Twelve Cats, 1992
Initialed by Dianne Kornberg
\$59, Limited to 200



LWS 040
Cartwheel #2, from the Cartwheel Suite
Initialed by Dianne Kornberg
\$59, Limited to 200



STUDIO REFLECTIONS

Photographic Meditations in a Painter's Workplace



by

David Grant Best

David Grant Best





KEEPING THE PHOTOGRAPH AT ARM'S LENGTH

A Lecture on the Relationship of Life and Work

by

Bill Jay

A few years ago I dated a psychologist. Briefly. She would throw me, unexpectedly, bizarre questions and then delight in analyzing them, detailing the negative aspects of my personality. We were watching American football on television when she asked: What position would *you* prefer to play? I should have known what was coming, but without thought I responded: I would prefer to be the commentator in the box, high above the field, watching and attempting to predict the patterns of play. Naturally this meant that I was anti-social, aloof, an egotist, a voyeur of life rather than a participant. Because she may have been right I was, naturally, even more irritated. Certainly, that is how I see my relationship to the medium of photography. Not so much as a participant, more of an enthusiastic commentator on the “game.”

From this viewpoint, I would like to make a few general observations on the relationship between art and life in contemporary photography.

The crucial question is this: What relationship does a personal life have on an individual's photographs — and vice versa.

The answer, like a response in the *I Ching* to any of life's big problems, can be amazingly succinct: life and art should have *everything* to do



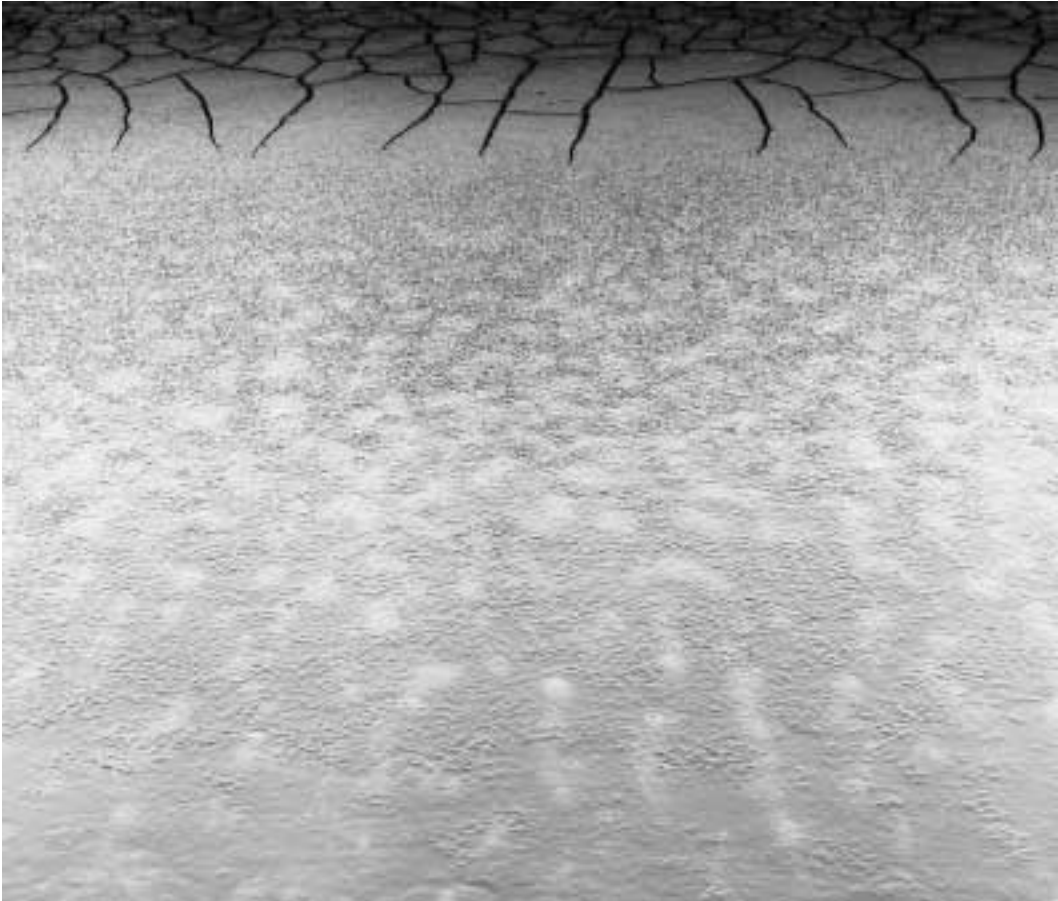
WET LAND VOICES



by

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping initial 'F' followed by a series of connected, fluid letters.

Frank Dienst



You must let fall body and mind.

Ju-Ching



AN INTERVIEW WITH SHELBY LEE ADAMS

Brooks Jensen:

I'd like to begin our conversation by addressing one of the most important issues related to your kind of work — the question of exploitation of an innocent subject. It needs to be understood right up front that you are not going into Appalachia and sort of wandering around with the camera and just taking pictures of odd looking people. Other photographers have done this in various regions and essentially exploited their subjects. In your case, you actually come from this area, don't you?

Shelby Lee Adams:

Yes. I was born in Hazard, Kentucky — which is a *real* place. I grew up in eastern Kentucky in the Appalachian mountain region that borders eastern Kentucky and southwestern Virginia. I lived with my grandparents who were mountain farmers and timber and logging men. I grew up as a child studying visual arts — drawing and painting — and then got more interested in photography when I was in college. Of course, in my hometown high school, back in the sixties, photography was not an option. Through my high school years, I did *assist* photographers who came to the area. I was a local kid who could be a scout, introducing news photographers and filmmakers to the Appalachian community.

- BJ:** Then you've seen people exploited by unscrupulous photographers.
- SA:** I would take people around who were photographers for *The New York Times* or *The Boston Globe* or *The Washington Post* because Appalachia was a newsworthy topic. I learned to resent photographers and disliked some of the experiences the local people and my own family had working with these outsiders. I resented how they photographed and then described the subjects I'd introduced them to.
- BJ:** You told a story in the introduction to *Appalachian Legacy* about how photographers would promise to send pictures and then didn't.
- SA:** Exactly. I introduced many professional photographers to this culture who would promise anything and everything to get their pictures and no one ever heard from them again. That is, until a year later and we'd read some story in a magazine that was not always an accurate description.
- BJ:** That makes it even more difficult for subsequent photographers.
- SA:** Yes. Later I became a teacher and established a strict rule for my students: if you are going to photograph someone, anyone, whether in Europe or South America, do what you say you're going to do. I always do so myself, for my own feelings of *responsibility* if nothing else. My work in Appalachia is in very isolated areas — the heads of the "hollers" as we call them in eastern Kentucky — but I've never gone into an area that hasn't had some exposure to the media. My subjects often pull out a newspaper article, maybe dated a few years back, or some video that they're in. They've all had experience with news documentarians.
- BJ:** You've worked on this project now for some twenty-five odd years. That's a huge commitment to one particular subject matter, particularly by today's standards where so many photographers tend to blast in and blast out.
- SA:** For me it is always going *home*. For fifteen years now, I've lived in Massachusetts which is 900 miles away from where I grew up. I love Appalachia and spend two to three months every year back there. For me, it's not just doing a photo project; I am revisiting my own home, my own family, as much as I'm making a photographic statement.
- BJ:** When I saw your first book *Appalachian Portraits* in a bookstore. I picked it up and had a response



APPALACHIAN PORTRAITS

Two Families



by

Shelby Lee Adams

Shelby Lee Adams



The hog killing, 1990



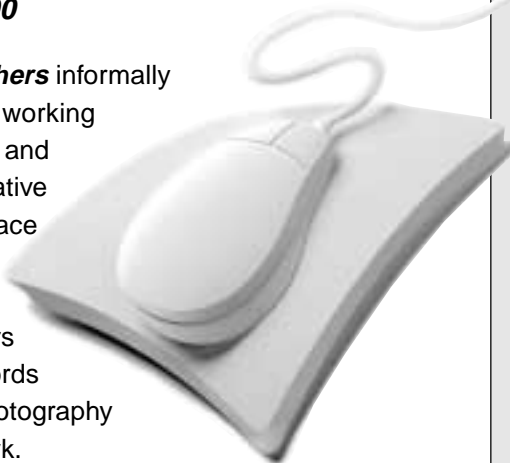
Brice and Crow on porch, 1992

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Being There

Being There profiles
 Irish American artist David Grant Best



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Canvas 2007

FIVE HOURS ON THE ROCK



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Artist's interview with Robert Vizzini

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Robert Vizzini

Canvas 2007

Alan McGee

SAND

The Sand Series Portfolio

Artist's interview with Alan McGee

Contact artist
 Metadata

Alan McGee

High Plains Farm



Portrait of the Prairie

William Blackburn

Contact artist
 Metadata

High Plains Farm



High Plains Farm Portfolio

Contact artist
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Steven Katzman

The Boot Camp Series



Contact artist
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Jean-Jacques Dickar

Empty Rooms

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SANTIAGO


Saint of Two Worlds

Juan Myers

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Figures

An Alphabet Book



Contact artist
 Metadata

Figures

Leaving



a portfolio by Paul Kerry

Contact artist
 Metadata

enduring spirit



Contact artist
 Metadata

Lost in America



Contact artist
 Metadata

TRANSITION



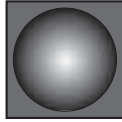
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White Soap Bubbles



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