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Thesis photographs

Judith Hanlon

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THESIS PHOTOGRAPHS

BY

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM

SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

MAY 1, 1984

Charles Werberig
Charles Werberig, Chairperson
Associate Professor of Photography
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

Owen Butler
Owen Butler
Assistant Professor of Photography
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences

Gregory Gillespie
American Painter
Retrospective, Hirshhorn Museum, 1977
PERMISSION TO COPY

I, Judith Hanlon prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction of my report, Thesis Photographs, is made. I can be reached at the following address:

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Date April 30, 1984 Signature Judith Hanlon
For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands:...and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

James Agee
"Let Us Now Praise Famous Men"
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DEDICATION

To S.E.H. with love
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First I would like to thank certain peers and associates, beginning with Linda McCausland and Anthony Guidice who enthusiastically shared their work, ideas, and passion for photography, and who spurred me on in my own attempts with their flattery, teasing, tirades, and moral support.

What would a photographic outing be without Linda's gigantic chocolate candy bars or Anthony's salami sandwiches and beer? I must thank Linda again as well for her help in practical matters related to getting the work done and exhibited. And Anthony for his refreshing outbursts of cynical idealism!

Thank-you to Kathy Collins for the generous use of lenses before she even knew me, and later for her thoughtful questions, friendly support, and open frankness in her views -- and for missing an important lecture to attend my thesis sharing!

And thanks to John Westbrook in chem lab for technical information, and to Dick Norman for lens boards, uninvited assertiveness training books, and humorous wisdom about academic preponderancy.

I am grateful to each of my Thesis Board Members for different reasons.
I wish to thank Charles Werberig for his guidance and patient hours of encouragement for myself and many others in our individual efforts; for his enthusiastic appreciation, breadth of interest, and subtle understanding of various art forms and their inter-relationships; and for his warmth, candor, and subdued sense of the ridiculous and the sublime. When I would meet students who didn't quite fit the mold, or who were a little temperamental--such as Roy Greer or Anthony Guidice, I'd ask them right away if they'd met Charles Werberig, and if they hadn't, would tell them to find him as soon as possible; if they couldn't relate with him then they were probably terminally hopeless! Charles Werberig is a born teacher/counselor--an intelligent, feeling, accepting human being.

Thanks to Owen Butler--for unreservedly expressing in his classes his keen insights and sensitive intelligence about photography and photographing; for his demonstration of what it means to be articulate--to say what needs to be said in a pointed, clear and timely manner; to ask the pertinent question, and to be silent when it is most expressive and meaningful. I also want to thank him for his respect and serious consideration of student work. He cared enough to praise and enjoy good work, or to show indignation when gimmickry proudly appeared in displayed photographs; it would have been simpler to have been passive or to have overlooked these problems, and simpler
not to have engaged in dialogue that occasionally offended the egos of sometimes pretentious graduate students; but good teaching flows from the love and understanding of a subject, and the unequivocal expression of related knowledge and feelings.

Gregory Gillespie -- when I first met this person he was an outspoken young undergraduate student from New Jersey. I remember him once striding to the front board before a class of about fifty students to debate Dr. Paul Zucker, a published art historian and a very formidable professor and intimidator of students. I was impressed with Greg's artless conviction, and with his sheer intestinal fortitude. He was also a dedicated worker, a loyal and generous friend, and gentle as he was outspoken.

Years later he was a very successful artist, and when I approached him about being on my thesis board I was unsure as to his response. He accepted, and was as gracious and forthright as I remembered. When I drove to see him with a stack of photographs of very mixed quality, he greeted me with a big smile and bear hug and then sat down to slowly and carefully look through my work. He gave his opinions directly and simply, and then unhurriedly shared his own work without the slightest condescension, while I also spoke my mind. I thank him for the experience of knowing him in his uncompromised integrity, his gravity-free imagination, and his human kindness.
I. INTRODUCTION

Preliminary Remarks

I make but one reservation in determining the objective of photography: that it should not be used to create a work in which it is apparent that a clearer communication might have been established in other ways. Excepting this, I have no theories which condition my work; theories follow practice, are never a part of the creative process. Logic implies repetition, the dullness of stability, while life is fluid, ever changing. Understanding is not reached through vicariously acquired information, but in living and working fully.

Edward Weston
"A Contemporary Means to Creative Expression"

As everyone is aware, the thesis work involves first the proposal -- the system, scheme, or plans for goals and procedures; then the project -- the body of work and its presentation; and finally the report -- the written summation in which the work and related experiences are discussed.

I found the greatest difficulties lay in composing the proposal and summary report since these were concerned with verbalizations -- first as theoretical and propositional, and ultimately as justification, explanation or conclusion.

Since I intended in my thesis work to continue my intuitive way of working, these requirements posed an existential dilemma or challenge. A priori conceptualiza-
tions could be antithetical to my creative work. Regarding this, I agree with the words of Josef Sudek:

When a photographer decides on a theme, he wants to finish, put it all together, and close a chapter. But that's forcing it. It is better rather to do other things too and to live. When something doesn't come together by itself it cannot be forced. The photos then look tired.¹

I consider my work its own justification, and question the validity and relevance of verbal summations of highly subjective experience.

Nevertheless, I understand the need in an academic environment for some framework and record for evaluative purposes, though I needed to exercise care that planning and writing would not deaden my awareness and enjoyment, and subsequently limit the range of possibility and quality of my work.

Thesis Proposal

Man is in love and loves what vanishes, what more is there to say?

William Butler Yeats
"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen:"

Purpose

I seek to enjoy the wordless intimacy with reality that photography permits. I intend to photograph any subject that intrigues me and will proceed intuitively and directly. Acceptance is the freeing precondition that permits the simultaneous discovery of self and other through the work.

Scope

Jacques Maritain's discussions of the objectification of poetic intuition have long interested me. He regards the art object as necessarily consistent. Therein lies its power of simultaneously revealing signs both of the unconscious self of the artist and of the inner mystery of objects.

I accept his premise that the resonant strength of the work is directly proportional to the spiritual freedom, purity of instinct, and depth of passion brought to content experienced--the content of things, and the

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content of the work itself.

Further, I believe that the fidelity of the artist to his own need, and the generosity inherent in his desire to understand what is within and beyond, demand freedom from pre-occupation with concerns of style, merit, acceptability, and other external criteria. Continuity of a kind is inevitable, and emerges from unconscious levels unavoidably; it is as the fingerprint from one's finger.

In the work itself, form and content are existentially inseparable, even though the potential for perceptual emphasis, distortion and play has always been recognized. I am drawn to photographs where form and content are simultaneously perceived, with neither advancing separately. I recognize Atget and Sudek as masters of this special kind of balance, and choose them as models.

In addition, the works and ideas of a number of writers, artists, and teachers influence me. I continually consult with these friends, without whom existence and work would comprise a lonely journey.

Procedure

The photographic format is selected for its appropriateness to the expression of response.

Readings and visits to the House Archives will continue as in the past. Observations about both the process and the evidence developing in the work will be
documented in a journal.

The final exhibition will consist of twenty or more prints selected by my thesis board and myself. Spring 1983 is the projected exhibition date.
II. EXPOSITION

Intuitive Procedure

I start out with my mind as free from an image as the silver film on which I am to record, and I hope as sensitive.

Edward Weston
"Photography-Not Pictorial"

We should note that the lack of preformed pattern or preconceived idea of how anything ought to look is essential to this blank condition. Such a state of mind is not unlike the sheet of film itself -- seemingly inert, yet so sensitive that a fraction of a seconds exposure conceives a life in it.

Minor White
"The Camera Mind and Eye"

I proceed without conscious precondition, plan, or expectation. My motivation and energy spring from the pleasures inherent in the process. These result from unconditionally obeying spontaneous responses to the forces I feel in content.

Placing myself in ordinary situations that attract or provoke through certain unpredictable visual phenomena or dimly sensed psychological aspects, I then use the camera to explore the content directly and intuitively, maintaining insofar as possible what psychologist Anton Ehrenzweig describes as an unfocused state of attention.\(^1\)

In a heightened state of energy and without
effort, excepting that which is fully absorbing, so that working is a kind of elation, there begins an intense movement between my intuiting self, the subject, and the now newly forming image on the ground glass.

In this experience of giving over, of losing conscious controls and expectations, there develops a growing empathy or resonance with the subject and the forming image. My conscious mind has only the vaguest intentions, while my subjective self actively and clearly intuits.

There are no abstract aesthetic principles to be proved, nor any a priori visions to be pedantically reincarnated. Image, subject and self are thereby free to become more and more closely and mutually affecting, until, at a certain moment of balanced energy, synthesis occurs, and the image becomes autonomous.

The power and character of the resulting image will directly correspond with the intensity of my contact, and the manner in which I reconcile my needs, gravitations, and vulnerabilities with the possibilities inherent in the subject.

1 It is Ehrenzweig's belief that too precise visualization inhibits low level scanning -- that the Gestalt law of closure may block the creative person's ability to broaden the scope of the work by forcing a choice between apparently contradicting patterns -- patterns that intuitive unconscious powers could comfortably reconcile. Anton Ehrenzweig, "Conscious Planning and Unconscious Scanning," in Education of Vision, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1965), pp. 27-49.
Reality Testing

I'm very disorderly. I never did make notes or set myself a stint of work .... Since I have no order, I know nothing about plots. The stories with me begin with an anecdote or a sentence or an expression, and I'll start from there and sometimes I write the thing backwards - I myself don't know exactly where any story is going .... Then when I've got a lot of it down, the policeman has got to come in and say, "Now look here, you've got to give this some sort of unity and coherence and emphasis," the old grammatical rules - and then the hard work begins. But it's pleasure - it's just like you get pleasure out of a hard, fast tennis game ....

William Faulkner
from "Faulkner at West Point"

The complete subjectivity I allow myself while photographing is joined with a colder more objective eye after the initial darkroom romance has faded. The newly developed negatives and their first printings always thrill in the anticipation of remembered feelings and the desire to re-experience the magical ground glass visions.

After the proofs are matted, I display them in my home where I am daily forced to look at the real information and evidence they contain. During this time I make initial judgments regarding each photograph -- sometimes judgments of deep disappointment, sometimes of interest or pleasure. I do not make final prints at this time.

Before anything else, the main question is whether the photograph is intact, or whole. That is, is it vital
in itself? Do the parts feel interrelated, essential? Is the whole contrived and forced, or does it exist freely, with its own energy? Can I see anew and continue to see the content with interest, respect, and pleasure?

Usually within a very short time I have divided a new group of pictures into the 'nos', 'maybes', and 'yeses'. The 'nos' are immediately disenchanting; I can clearly sense that the subject has been done a dis-service, and I have not been able to meet it with adequate energy and openness.

The 'yeses' and 'maybes' continue to engage me. These are photographs that confirm the reality of my original feelings during the actual photographing, or are photographs that present unexpected but provocative information. In either case, further study is necessary before I feel inclined to begin final printing.

Unlike the writer whose individual works can be made, reordered and reconstructed over a period of time, the photographer must learn through repeated isolated attempts with the camera, and long looking at a multitude of separate images. Much growth and learning take place long after the ground glass adjustments and the printing, in the intervals between, when memories strive and surface, testing the images, calling them to task.
Presentation

My work was displayed at Linda McCausland's gallery, 28 Arlington. The gallery area is in the renovated downstairs of her home in the 6th ward. The space there is intimate and varied, including a pleasant entry hall with fireplace and stained glass window, two windowed larger rooms connected with an open archway, and also a smaller, more secluded room behind these. The chirping of a multitude of finches and other birds fills the air, adding to the prevailing warmth and charm.

This space was ideally suited to the exhibition of my work which was diverse in content and small in dimensions. The broken wall spaces of different sizes, the interesting corner areas and the variously inclusive views allowed flexibility in the grouping of photographs.

The sharing and opening were held simultaneously, with a lovely celebration feast prepared by Linda.

Interestingly, several close friends and photographers, whose work and opinions I respect, expressed distinctly differing points of view, favoring or not favoring very dissimilar pictures. This helped me to realize the subjectivity we all bring to our judgments.

Staying with the exhibit during all the gallery hours, I had ample opportunity to examine my own work
with a more objective eye, and to gain the overall view.

The diversity I knew as inherent in my work and way of working had at first worried me slightly in terms of potential exhibition problems. This concern, after all, proved groundless. No one voiced any discomfort with the diversity in the work, or with the manner of exhibition, and my original beliefs about style as a simple extension of personal involvement were confirmed.
III. BIBLIOGRAPHY


IV. APPENDIX

Technical Procedure

The photographs presented were taken with a 5 X 7 view camera, using a 10" Commercial Ektar f/6.3 and a Symmar 180 mm f/5.6.

The 5 X 7 negatives were made on Kodak Tri-X pan professional film and individually developed in Edwal FG7. The zone system was used to calibrate exposures and development times. Using a densitometer I then found the density range of all my negatives and grouped them accordingly.

Because I did not feel any single paper/developer combination was equally suitable for the best expression of each image, I did a series of experiments with various papers, including Portriga, Brovira, Kodabromide, Azo, and Polycontrast.

I tested each paper in each of three developers, Platinum II, Amidol, and Beers 4. Within each experiment I did further experiments. For example, with Azo and Portriga I used several paper grades to notice color changes, grade to grade, while the developer and toner remained constant.

When I found a paper/developer combination I judged to be compatible with a particular negative, I then experimented further, varying dilutions, exposure times,
development times, and toning times with selenium toner. I tested with three different amidol formulas -- Bullock's, Gowin's, and Weston's. Occassionally I used a water bath treatment for more control. On a few prints I applied potassium ferricyanide for local reduction.

Except for the FG7 and Platinum II, I mixed most the chemicals used, and so have gained some control in the process. I feel that I have merely begun to understand some of the possibilities of expressive printing.

In the near future I would like to try the Ansco 130 developer and the Edwal 106 warm tone glycin developer. Also I intend to enlarge certain highly detailed images. I have purchased a very old 5 X 7 Elwood enlarger that I intend to repair for this purpose.
Amidol Formulas

Wynn Bullock's Amidol
(from Second Nature, Joseph Solan)

- water....................... ½ gal
- sodium sulfite............. 3T
- amidol...................... 2t
- potassium bromide......... 10cc 10% solution
- BB solution............... 10cc 10% solution
- citric acid................ ½t

Emmet Gowin's Amidol
(from Gowin's lecture at RIT, 1977)

- water....................... 32oz
- sodium sulfite............. 30g
- amidol...................... 5g
- potassium bromide......... 6g
- BB anti-fog or............. 1 tablet
  (coller Dupont BB)

Edward Weston's Amidol
(from The Print, Ansel Adams)

- water....................... 800cc
- sodium sulfite, dessicated 35g
- amidol...................... 11g
- potassium bromide......... 7.5g
- BB compound............... 60cc
  (stock solution)
- water to make............. 1200cc