The secret soul of things

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THE SECRET SOUL OF THINGS

by

Joyce E. Culver

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
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THE SECRET SOUL OF THINGS

By

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Date of Submission: September 18, 1980

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this report to my photography and artist friends and colleagues who all seem to be struggling to find answers through their work, and have made their concerns a part of their lives, not something outside themselves.
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THESIS PROPOSAL

for
The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

TITLE:  The Secret Soul of Things

PURPOSE:  The goals of my thesis are twofold: I will investigate the animate and inanimate forms within the landscape, visually documenting my experiences, and I will also explore the use of color photography as a communicative device for my feelings.

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"Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks."

Kandinsky

For the past four years I have photographed primarily in color, but it wasn't until the fall of 1977 that my vision became acutely aware of color and form within the landscape. A fascination grew inside of me for animated natural things, and later for the inanimate objects seeming also to have an existence of their own. The experience of photographing these situations was one of strong feelings on my part during the encounters with the objects of my attention. A confrontation between myself and the subject would be present, and a re-creation of this would follow in the darkroom. A description which has helped me to understand this is the statement by Paul Klee, who talks about the spirit which exists in matter. He states that:

The object expands beyond the bounds of its appearance by our knowledge that the thing is more than its exterior presents to our eyes.

My feeling of there being a strongly felt spirit within a subject is what holds my interest. It could be defined as a kind of religious experience. I have always been involved with the visual image as a means to reveal more than is there, and my intention is to achieve this through my photography. As Georgio De Chirico has said:

A work of art must relate to something that does not appear in its visible form.

My photographs will be semi-documentary in that they will record what is seen, yet they will be descriptive of my feelings as well. This will involve subtle manipulations of color in a subjective interpretation of the scene to achieve a magical effect, bordering on the surreal. Syl Labrot, in his book, Pleasure Beach, has mentioned the "iridescent" nature of color which "seems to live in an object," and this is a concern of mine. The interplay between the tonal and the chromatic will also be explored. I want this body of work to explore reality through interpretation, so that my photographs will live on their own, possessing my sense of encounter with the existence of the subject.
PROCEDURES AND WORK/TIME SCHEDULE

I will continue to photograph outside, using color negative film to record, and use both 35 mm and 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" format. I will present approximately 30 photographic prints as examples of my observations and interpretations. These were presented in a show at the M.F.A. Photography Gallery in April, 1979. Accompanying this will be a report that includes personal reactions as well as pertinent technical information.

SOURCES OF REFERENCE


Labrot, Syl, Pleasure Beach
EVOLUTION OF IDEA and WORK PROCEDURE

When I became serious about making photographs, one of my aims was to learn more about myself by making photographs that included me, people who were close to me, and my immediate environment. It made me happy to see that I could indeed accomplish this goal by reacting spontaneously and to feel free in any approach taken to achieve it.

Then one day I was drawn to what could be called "landscape" subject matter which began with a photograph of a golden bush (PLATE I) that was dying in a country field outside Rochester, New York. I remember slowing my orange Volkswagon to look at the form, responding to it naturally without thinking a great deal about it, yet feeling a strong attraction to the thing. The high grass was still wet with dew as I walked through the field to look more closely at the entangled mass of branches. There was a definite presence of life in the object before me, a communicative association between myself and it. It was growing wildly and came toward me, leaping outward, reflecting its own spirit as I watched.

I do believe I became absorbed and enamored by the energy caused by the visual stimulus of this form. It was enjoyable to feel engulfed by the particular kind of energy generated by the subject as well as myself. The affinity between
EVOLUTION OF IDEA and WORK PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

this other living thing and me could possibly relate to the time when—as a tomboy growing up in the suburbs of Westchester County, New York—I had played in the woods and felt a deep love for nature, trees, berry bushes, and even the dirt which was always part of my existence then. Perhaps this love caused the later response.

Scientists describe an aura that emanates and glows unseen around all kinds of living things. Scientific photographs are capable of illustrating the aura or halo around a person's finger, for instance, which increases as it responds to the proximity of another human being. This would be an apt description of the relationship between myself and the object in my first photograph. The aura and energy made itself felt and drew me to it.

Another aspect which attracted me in the first photograph was the quality of light that caused a brightness and inner luminance—a radiance of color from within the form. This quality is partially the result of the play of light at certain times of the day and year. During fall, the sun sometimes becomes bright in the morning and is then intermittently hidden by clouds (typical of Rochester's pre-winter weather). On the morning I made the photo of the dying golden vegetation, the light was like that. Intrigued by the phenomena, morning hours became a time for me to photograph, and the fall presented opportunities to capture very rich and saturated colors.

That golden or "burning bush," as a friend called it,
was the beginning of my interest in photographing nature in general, but it also raised questions in my mind about the meaning of chance arrangements and my intuitive responses to living things. This pondering later extended to inanimate objects as well.

The first photograph was special to me in that it not only introduced me to a new kind of subject, but also to a certain mysterious experience which became a search leading me to react to environmental stimuli. I found I could repeat this experience again and again with more organic subject matter in different form. It evolved into a much more conscious experience because I began to think increasingly about it and to observe everything around me. I came to know and understand the conditions surrounding the object of interest, and if I felt "something" existed, I would be drawn into the subject. With succeeding photographs I hoped the mystery would be there since it had occurred in the first.

Three or possibly four exposures were made that morning, using my Nikon camera at 1/8 of a second at f/16, with a 35 mm wide angle lens. During the following week I decided to print the photograph after some study of it on the contact sheet. When it got down to the final stages of film printing, I lightened the color of the central gold mass so it would appear brighter than normal. Local dodging was done with my fist, and it achieved the effect I wanted. The color turned out less saturated than normal with more intense color radia
EVOLUTION OF IDEA and WORK PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

From within the form. This method was only the beginning of very careful color manipulation.

Throughout the remainder of the fall I continued to look at nature during my morning hours of travel. No special effort was made to "go out" to photograph since my camera was always with me (a habit formed even before my thesis work). Extensions from the print of the gold bush grew to include other studies of foliage, bushes, apples and rocks. Notwithstanding my fondness for the countryside, I also turned to the suburbs and the city of Rochester for motivation. When it occurred, a change took place because the configurations were man-made. This didn't disturb me, but it did change my work somewhat: arrangements were now contrived designs hinting at social implications instead of being totally natural.

"Rock Arrangement" (PLATE 2) is an example of this. Although the objects are from nature, the interesting thing about the photograph is the placement of the forms, the positioning of each rock, and the shape of this "garden." There is also my point of view in making the photo. My closeness to the subject and the sense of confrontation with the arrangement causes feelings of imposition, as if there is a forceful introduction between the subject and the viewer.

The whiteness of the gravel attracted me, as well as the positioning of the rocks. Too, the deliberate delineation of the garden by green metal strippings—which hold the white gravel in place—reminded me of earthworks popular in the
EVOLUTION OF IDEA and WORK PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

early 1970's. Later when I made the print, the leaves within and around the major shape of the garden became more noticeable to me. (Leaves, and the way they position themselves naturally, have fascinated me for several years now.) These leaves add contrast because they fall randomly around the marked-off garden. Some seem to push against the green metal enclosure. This photograph is one of the few prints which has been printed normally without any mask to decrease or enhance color.

As the winter months came, my photography subsided due to the cold weather. But I was lured back to work when spring arrived and the first things I noticed were fluorescent red or pink colors with interesting forms and shapes. "Two Pink X's, Rochester, N.Y." (PLATE 3) were found on a newly cemented sidewalk near my apartment-building in Rochester. The X's had been sprayed with fluorescent paint by a construction worker to designate markings for surveyors. In this instance I was struck by the intensity of fluorescent color along with the relationship between the pink X on the light gray in opposition to the second pink X against the brown earth. The day was also atypical of the time I usually photograph. The sun was very bright and there were no clouds; however this isn't apparent in the photograph because it is flat, without distinct shadows.

When the photograph was printed I decided to intensify the color on one of the X's to make it slightly brighter. A mask from an unwanted print was used to burn in the right X
so that there is a very light shadow on one side, along with a deeper saturation of color. The two X's seem to jump because the eye goes back and forth diagonally on the print as it views the "treated" pink color against two contrasting backgrounds, brown and light gray. Some people wonder if the X is on the photograph, while others think I deliberately sprayed the X's on the pavement and ground. All of my photographs are made from found situations, but I am not against conceptualization and the manipulation of reality to make an image as long as it is not destructive to the environment.

The last phase of my work continued after I moved to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where I began to teach in September, 1978. A change took place there when I started using a Hasselblad 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" camera with a 50 mm wide angle lens. The use of this camera introduced dramatic differences in my work, even though the same energy was present as before. The square image and larger negative size plus increased detail allowed me to step back more from the subject. Emphasis was not only on one major object of interest, but often on two or three with smaller points that were supportive to the main subjects.

The 50 mm lens also caused distortion, which is particularly striking in "Pence, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania" (PLATE 4). The sense of confrontation very much in evidence in the photograph because the central curved iron fence-post looms prominently as a result of the lens distortion. There is
additionally a slight convergence of the vertical posts which support the central area of interest. The Hasselblad (500 C/M) slowed my physical approach since it is bulkier and also caused greater contemplation of the area of interest before me. Not that I regretted this. I enjoyed the change and was ready to translate my ideas through the new format.

I am still in the process of exploring this last phase with the 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" format, even despite a cut-off point in April, 1979 when my Thesis Show was hung. This continuation is occurring in the very midst of buildings and people here in New York City where I am presently living.
II. TECHNICAL ASPECTS

The utilization of acetate masks to achieve slight color tints within certain shapes was a technical device that developed as a means to express feeling, and to accentuate areas within an image. The acetate used is a clear, shiny plastic which is laid down on the easel and taped at the top-most edge to prevent movement. Then while projecting the image through the enlarger, a black Magic Marker is used to color and block an area that will be made lighter.

Since the Magic Marker is water-based, I would often smear it around on the plastic to remove any lines that might be visible as a result of drawing. Occasionally even a piece of opaque paper cut to shape would be adhered to prevent light from reaching that part of the image to be lightened. The final mask would appear to have silhouettes of several shapes, all in black, conforming to shapes in the print that would be dodged. This technique was used to lighten colors only. During the printing stage, the mask would be moved up and down above the image, keeping it in line with the shape. This worked extremely well once a rhythm was established.

Decisions on which colors would be lighter were arrived at after several prints had been made to achieve the correct color balance with normal color saturation. Thought and consideration was then given to my vision at the time of the photograph, including whether the change in color intensity would reflect my feelings about the original scene as I had experienced it. The next step was to make the mask and try
II. TECHNICAL ASPECTS (CONT'D)

to create the desired change in one or more colors in the print. Once this was accomplished, I would ascertain whether this effectively rendered the scene as I had pictured it.

An illustrative example of this process can be cited in "Fluorescent Rock, Henrietta, N.Y. 1978" (PLATES 5 and 6). When the photograph is printed normally, the asphalt, the three lime-green circular bushes, and some of the green leaves become darker or more saturated in color tonality. To change this, I made a mask which enabled me to dodge these shapes and lighten them. In this particular image, I also made a mask to burn in the large fluorescent rock and the smaller one hiding behind the middle bush.

Although the technique of dodging was my primary tool, occasionally the option of increasing the exposure was chosen to make colors more intense. I would then use two masks, one for dodging, and one for burning. In this example, both rocks were made darker by utilizing a rejected print with holes cut to the precise outline of the rocks. Along the bottom edge of the larger rock the shadow became darker, resulting in a three-dimensional uplifting of the form more pronounced than if it had been left alone. The photograph has a flat appearance for the most part, except that the rock is brighter and more dimensional now. My recollections and final interpretation of the original scene merged when I began to use dodging and burning techniques. The prints were no longer just the end-product of the color film's ability to record, but were also the experiential
aspect of my reaction to the subject. One result of using plastic as a mask was the slight diffusion of the image which affected the print's detail. This was quickly pointed out to me by Charles Werberig after our first conversation about my work. I think plastic use lends a soft quality to the look of the prints, but along with this the color shifting contributes to the semi-surrealistic effect caused by both techniques.

All photographs are Ektacolor prints from 35 mm or 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" color negatives. Many were processed via a Colenta floor model color print processor, and others in a Unicolor Unidrum with Ektaprint color chemistry. The latter procedure was more time consuming in that temperature controls were by hand. I also experienced some difficulty with star-like cyan marks which started to appear on my prints, and had to send an example of one print to Kodak for analysis.

The cause? Static electricity, due probably, I was told, to a dry darkroom in combination with inadvertently rubbing the acetate against the Ektacolor paper during exposure. This can also happen when the paper is removed from the box and is slid past the sheet next to it. Kodak suggested that I make the room moist by leaving a bucket of water near the heat vent, and also to be careful with the removal of paper, and use of the acetate. Aside from this cleared-up problem, there were no other difficulties.

On the whole, however, I made numerous prints before I
felt absolutely content. This was the result of the procedure-and-thought process included during the completion of each step. A constant evaluation went on--first in achieving the correct color balance; deciding which colors would become different and why, followed by experimentation with the masks. I must have made twenty to twenty-five prints before I reached the final answer I sought. After that peak was realized, I would go ahead and turn out five or six prints in an edition for that photograph. Needless to say, final culmination was quite satisfying because each print became an interpretation of my feelings about color rendition and choice of forms to be emphasized in the photo. The image then became totally mine and I could proceed to the next negative.
III. ENERGY AND CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS

The energy I found present during my photographic experiences manifested itself in the two-dimensional image through one or more combinations of the elements of visual texture and linear variety, space relationships and tensions between and among forms and shapes, as well as color intensity and tonal value of certain forms and areas within the rectangle or square. Some of these design elements assert themselves more in certain photographs than in others, and a discussion of each of the above should clarify my feelings about their contributions and role in each photograph.

A. Visual Texture

In a two-dimensional work of art, the viewer's eye moves throughout the image to dwell on and perceive each item before him/her. This is a natural process: to look at and examine the space and attempt to understand what the artist has chosen to present. Too, in this space there can exist points where the eye will see, and the senses "feel," the texture of a particular object or spatial area dependent upon how the line, shape, color affects movement of the eye.

For example, in a photograph of a female nude, the eye may travel slowly over the curves of the body until the viewer virtually feels the smoothness present in the form.

In many of my photographs one object or areas will become a place of emphasis and enclosed within will be a break-up
A. Visual Texture (Cont'd)

do of space through line, shape or color interaction. Usually there is a great deal of activity in these areas, so the eye has no choice but to jump around in the detail presented. In terms of describing this textural activity, its effect is like many atoms bouncing off one another, and charged-up rather than calm or smooth. The forms chosen possess this particular kind of quality to begin with; specific examples will illustrate it more clearly.

The photograph of the "Golden Bush," for instance, illustrates a central, circular form with an area of enclosed space filled with energy and texture. Aside from my personal feelings of attraction to the form, in an abstract sense the energy is due to the network of conflicting lines and the leaping up or movement of the bush toward the viewer. The artist, Jim Dine, a prominent painter, used line similarly in his drawings of hearts to evolve the form of the heart on paper. The same kind of scribble might also be present in a cartoon drawing of a tornado or twister. The lines go around like a "Slinky," but the outside shape ends up as a tornado, as per Dine's drawing. In the gold bush the branches are lines which constitute the nature and internal structure of the form.

In another enclosed form, "Lime Green Bush, Henrietta, New York" (PLATE 7), the same linear break-up of space repeats itself in a texture made up of yellow and green pointed pieces of grass which make up the mass. There is a burst of life like a display of fireworks exploding in the sky. The eye goes
A. Visual Texture (Cont'd)

right to the form (there really is no alternative) because of
the flash-like sudden radiation of light, as well as to the
extreme patterning and overlapping of linear shapes--akin to
zebra stripes--which keep the eye in motion. The vision is
also revved-up by overlapping lines in "Brown Bush, Rochester,
New York" (PLATE 8). The rectangular enclosure of the photo-
graph is more noticeable since the linear patterning covers
the entire top half of the frame, and the image is divided
into two kinds of space: one more surface-oriented and the
other more distinct and three-dimensional. Had the distance
from the subject been greater, the entire outer shape of the
bush would become visible to enclose the texture. As the
image stands, however, the texture creates an energetic and
interesting spatial division.

Linear patterning also found its way as a textural ele-
ment supportive or secondary to the things noticed initially
the hot pink color of the round leaves of the foliage grab
one's attention at first, but as the eye moves to the lower
green portion of the print to its right and left, the blades
of grass encroach upon the red form and--together with their
highlights--create a feeling of movement. This reminds me of
the grass texture in the Andrew Wyeth painting, "Christina's
World," which I first saw at the Whitney Museum in the early
1970's. The layered thin brush strokes built up on the surface
encompass the figure, Christina (who is in a field of grass),
A. Visual Texture (Cont'd)

in space. The feeling of growth, turmoil and movement are associations I make with this element.

In addition to the use of line as a strong textural-visual element in the photographs, I began to take an interest in the way shapes played in certain spatial areas, causing the same feelings of energy to prevail. This led to photographs where predominant shapes were elliptical, dot-like, leaf-like, round, rock-like, and later more object-oriented. The number of key shapes could be many and small in size across a good portion of an image area. They were in clusters or enclosed within forms. In later prints, two and three dominant shapes were present with smaller shapes interacting in a positive way. I thought about the positioning and relationships that were naturally established, and decided I liked subjects where groups of shapes were springing back and forth in space.

Early photographs such as "Apples, Pittsford, N.Y." (PLATE 10) and "Leaves Falling, Rochester, N.Y." (PLATE II), are examples that show a special raining of round and elliptical shapes through an entire area which cause a visual patterning and energy field. As I observed these photographs, memories ran to Larry Poons' optical paintings (PLATE 25) of ellipses which create vibrations using complementary tints of colors on canvas. His adoption of small elliptical shapes with their organization and arrangement make the space move. Although the emphasis in Poons' work is color and space (similar to my own concerns), importance should be given to choice of shape, size,
A. Visual Texture (Cont'd)

and number of shapes to break up space.

As Wynn Bullock said:

Dots arranged within the frame of a picture can express an order of staccato sound as well as creating inner tensions related to space and time dimensions.¹ [There is a musical energy which is present in many of the photographs due to the spatial interaction of smaller shapes of leaves, apples, grass lines, Christmas bells, tiny red flowers, and aqua leaves on an iron fence. Just how these shapes and forms organize the space is also important to the presence of energy and my evaluation of spacial patterns that have developed between photographs. ]

B. Space

In my approach to spatial concerns there are two factors that I feel contributed to the outcome of each photograph. The first is the three-dimensional experience of actual space, the distance and angle of myself to the subject which changed in time. The second factor is the resulting two-dimensional picture plane and the division of space which could be flat, three-dimensional, or a combination of both. During the three-dimensional or actual experience of making the photograph, I was very close to the subject, usually within five or six feet, so there was a direct confrontation. This forced the viewer in turn to also see the object directly.

The experience similarly occurs when a person invades the space of another, and the second person may stand his/her

B. Space (Cont'd)

ground or back away. There is always a "safe" distance between people, but as one gets close, the involvement can change to become more personal or even threatening. The tightening up and subsequent closure of the space was a natural reaction on my part to let the subject show itself to me once I felt the "right" distance between myself and it was established. Aside from being within a particular distance, my point of view was at normal standing height, shooting either straight on or at a 45 degree angle. The latter was more influential in making the image appear flatter as opposed to a more three-dimensional view of a landscape with vanishing points. There is a feeling in the early work that you are seeing the photograph as if it were a slide under a microscope. The photographs seem to have a "studied" feeling, as if each thing is being examined.

Later when I began using the larger format 2 1/4" x 2 1/4" Hasselblad with a 50 mm wide angle lens, the spatial distance between myself and the subject increased as I started to include more subjects within the frame. Although this is not the case with "Fence, Bethlehem, Pa.;" for the most part it was the overriding tendency. The camera itself was bulkier, causing me to pause, shooting more slowly, knowing I had fewer negatives (12 on a roll) which would give increased detail. I was more inclined to organize the square space and to pull in more objects that would break up the space. There is still a feeling of confrontation, but the major elements are in
B. Space (Cont'd)

context with additional forms in space which have different intensity.

In the two-dimensional image the division of space took on two characteristics: a) Space could be deep or shallow (like a relief), yet there is always surface tension from one or more objects projecting themselves onto the surface of the paper, or out toward the viewer  b) Space is flat with tension between shapes on the photographic surface against a contrasting background. Within these boundaries, the majority of photographs show a breakdown of space that is either strongly centered, with central elements that are symmetrically or asymmetrically organized. There is a strong spatial opposition between major forms in images, and even a further break-up with smaller forms counteracting each other within these larger areas. Diagrams which simplify images into shape organization make it easier to see how this works (PLATES 12 and 13).

The way forms are organized in "Apples, Rochester, N.Y." illustrates the first characteristic spatial division where contrast exists among many small circular forms projecting out from a deeper landscape behind. Even though we know this is a realistic or three-dimensional scene, it appears surrealistic because the apples—looking like big red balls pushing out from the interior of the photograph—appear quite unattached to the tree from which they hang.

Our memories tell us that photographs are records of
depth experiences, but when camera angle and depth of field are controlled to change perspective, then our sense of reality changes too. The leafless branches also make the scene somewhat odd. There is a strange "hanging" of the apples before our eyes. Dodging each of the apples (with an acetate mask) to make them appear lighter adds to their coming forward on the page. Our sense of space becomes distorted as we view these hovering forms against a perspective-oriented background of grass and apples on the ground, and trees in the space beyond. Compositionally, the whole group of apples carries the eye across the upper portion of the image to divide the photograph horizontally into a top and bottom half. The trunk of the tree itself brings the eye to the center of the sheet, dividing it in half vertically. Within the group of apples there is further division of space by the individual apples that are seemingly equidistant from each other.

This smaller spatial division coincides with the kind of patterning discussed under Visual Texture. Future photographs which included plays with a symmetrical division of space along the surface shapes against three-dimensional backgrounds, followed. Among these are "Leaves Falling, Rochester, N.Y.," "Fencepost, Bethlehem, Pa.," "Leaves and Gold Tree, Bethlehem, Pa." and "Red Line, Mendon, N.Y."

Other photographs show subjects more enclosed in deep space with the principal object(s) seeming rounder and more self-contained inside the space. "Gold Bush," "Lime Green
B. Space (Cont'd)

Bush," "Fluorescent Milk Can," and "Two Mailboxes," all show one or more forms enclosed in familiar and understandable spatial contexts. The forms still advance forward in space mainly because they are emphasized through color manipulation.

"Two Mailboxes, Boca Raton, Fla." (PLATE I4), one of the last photographs completed in my thesis work, is a culmination since it represents a compilation of numerous elements which hark back to previous photographs. The Christmas balls hanging equidistant from each other on the evergreen tree are reminiscent of the pendulous apples in the photo of the apple tree in "Apples" (PLATE I0). The round forms hang over the top of the mailboxes, gracing them and drawing your attention up and then back to center. Also supportive to the mailboxes is the green hedge with tiny red flowers jumping randomly back and forth, leading the eye again to the center. These dancing, dot-like configurations participate in a subtle, delicate display of energy much the same as the orange flowers do in "Flowers and Fencepost, Rochester, N.Y." (PLATE I5)--another earlier photograph.

"Mailboxes" is an integration stressing inanimate and animate subject matter, with primary emphasis on the mailboxes. The palm tree to the right of the mailboxes is secondary, as is the hedge with red flowers. The light pole leaning to the left of the mailboxes is also supportive. It looks over the scene as if watching what is taking place. The photograph is much more scenic in that the space is understandable, quite
B. Space (Cont'd)

like that of a postcard scene. The two luminescent mailboxes come forward, asserting their presence through their color, even though they are self-contained in the composition. The photograph is the beginning of a new direction which has yet to be developed, but it is the result of several ideas present in earlier 35 mm work.

The object is there in each photograph, but the way this occurs in space changes. Some photographs show a relief-like use of space or are more flat-looking because I am peering down at a 45 degree angle with the objects coming up from the ground in relief. In "Fluorescent Rock, Henrietta, N.Y.,” an asymmetrical arrangement of three, round, ordered, yellow-green bushes and moon-like orange fluorescent rocks are planted on the ground, creating an unusual study of color and form in space.

What caught my eye at first was the bright orange color of the larger rock. It had been raining, everything was wet, and the colors were more vivid than normal. The large rock and the bushes were both outstanding, glowing as if the sky had dropped them from another world. Its color and shadow imbue the large rock with much more dimension than the circular bushes which are like three splotches across the top of the frame. Despite my interest in the shape, color and placement of form, I do feel that the scene is a bit ludicrous and pokes fun at the way things are ordered and made to appear in the world. This feeling is pervasive in other photographs as well.
B. Space (Cont'd)

Two other photographs, "Rock Garden, Henrietta, N.Y." and "Several Lime Green Bushes, Henrietta, N.Y." (PLATE 16), repeat this same concern with the arrangement of form. In "Rock Garden" jagged rocks of varying sizes are placed on a white bed of smaller rocks enclosed by green metallic striping to hold it all together. There is an absurdity in the way this appears, once again having been organized by someone who thought about what was "right" compositionally. The rocks do not jump out at the viewer but create interest similar to an earthwork in a curious sculptural design using natural materials. Spacing between the rocks of varying sizes causes a diagonal movement from the right to upper left side of the image. Almost the same arrangement is found in "Several Lime Green Bushes, except that the round, light aqua shapes really come forward to the surface of the picture plane. Here there is an abstraction and simplification of form to create interest in color plus, again, organization of shapes in space.

The treatment of a scene as a total flat surface display with the continuing idea of emphasis on shape and color advancement is evident in a few photographs. "Red Bush," for example, is a study of red and green highly textured and highlighted surfaces radiating light from within. The kind of lighting situation which I chose was not conducive to rendering form in a three-dimensional way since there is no real feeling of deep space in a physical sense. If I were to discuss the feelings about light, however, there is a sense of light projection
B. Space (Cont'd)

from a space within the form that comes out to me, the viewer. It's something that has occurred in many other photographs, but in this case the forms seem closer to the picture plane and appear flatter, more two-dimensional.

In another rather flat image, "Two Pink X's," the X's push against each other diagonally toward the center of the photo on a background of sidewalk and ground. The eye jumps back and forth from one to the other because the X shapes are of equal size and color against contrasting backgrounds of gray and brown. A slight feeling of roundness is indicated from the pink X on the right side. This is the result of burning-in to obtain a little shadow. In "Grass Patch" (PLATE I7), another diagonal composition, the light yellow dying grass creates a kind of "hole" seen in the frame--a cut-out of a flat area on the surface so that the photograph becomes a study of a relationship between two flat shapes in space.

Aside from an analytical understanding of space, I would like to discuss some additional feelings about it. The careful placement or "putting" of shapes into the image and the consequential uplifting of shape to appear on or above the surface of the color paper, is a strong theme throughout the work. My intuitive and natural response when arranging form(s) was to communicate the tension present between them and myself. Opposition and contrast concurrently vent the idea that the space is really vibrant, and that forms push and pull, moving in multi-directional routes in the photographs. Color contrast
B. Space (Cont'd)

is another reason for this movement. The degree of saturation of colors (that were locally dodged or lightened) forces the eye to notice particular shapes which jump out against darker backgrounds. Light against dark colors therefore work optically to entice the viewer's eye.

C. Color and Tonal Value

The brightness level of a color was extremely important to me, more so than the recognition that I was attracted to red more than green, for example, or to warm colors over cool. The lighting would always emphasize the color; the form(s) too would hit me and hold my attention, inspiring me to examine the rest of the scene. There are a variety of colors in the subjects I focused on. I never thought about photographing special colors except for the fluorescent reds, oranges and pinks which advanced in space and were alive against the stern brown landscape of Rochester's early spring.

I feel that Kandinsky's explanation for his attraction to colors coincides with my own. As he states:

Generally speaking, color is a power which directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.²

² Kandinsky, Wassily, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (Dover Publications, Inc. N.Y. 1977), p.25
C. Color and Tonal Value (Cont'd)

My spontaneous reactions certainly were based on my mood when each picture was made, therefore my choosing of the "keys" was totally subjective. Particular colors do repeat themselves a number of times in various photographs: yellow and orange, red and magenta (fluorescent), aqua, lime-green and green, white. Given that there are other colors in a color photograph, these are the ones that dominate in major forms.
IV. CONNECTING PHILOSOPHIES WITH OTHER ARTISTS/PHOTOGRAPHERS

I have never forgotten the extremely controversial painting, "Before the Mirror," (1876) by Edouard Manet (PLATE 16) which aroused a furor about representational art and the method an artist chooses to employ a particular medium for personal expression. Manet believed that a painting is composed of brushstrokes which, in combination, make up a tree, a human being, or whatever realistic object the artist desires to portray. But first and foremost he believed that the reality of the paint on canvas is not to be hidden from the eye, that it should be visible.

To connect this to photography, I refer to an article on "Joe Deal's Optical Democracy" by James Hugunin in Afterimage magazine. At the beginning of his article, Hugunin states:

Modern physics conceives of matter as a field of energy, as a structure of probable events across space, rather than objects in it. Reality is then conceived as the organization of everything around us.3

The premise for the above statement is that an absence of feelings about the intrinsic beauty of objects can exist, but can be replaced with a concentration on the way matter breaks up space in a non-objective fashion. Joe Deal's photographs (PLATES 19 and 20) are not a visual narrative of beautiful mountains near a raging river under ominous clouds; they are a visual field of pictorial elements that simply break up

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3Hugunin, James, "Joe Deal's Optical Democracy," Afterimage, Vol. 6, No. 7, February, 1979, p.25
space in the photograph. The objects in his photographs are not to be studied for their own innate characteristics since they're there to organize the space in a certain way: a physical non-objective kind of reality. The emotive qualities are not explored. In both the Manet and Joe Deal examples, the concept is the subjugation of generally accepted artistic concerns to more formal concerns, which opens new doors for communication.

In the case of Manet, the focus was on the reality of using paint—a door-opener that led to abstract expression and the early stages of the Impressionistic Movement. This is a formal concern. Joe Deal's visual patterning using many objects in space also changes our ideas of what a landscape can be. The landscape is no longer just a pretty scene but rather compiled of abstract visual forms in space.

Hugunin goes on to state:

Deal simply creates a list of nouns strung together by their fortuitous arrangement before the camera: 'tree, grass, home, street/water, brush, cacti, street/cacti, road, ground, road/stones, dirt, stones, dirt.'

Deal's treatment of landscape is analytical and unromantic, yet I feel that my own concerns with treatment of forms in space overlaps with his formal treatment of objects in space in that we are both aware of careful arrangement. My work still is about the life and beauty of the form of a rock,

4Ibid., p.5
IV. CONNECTING PHILOSOPHIES ETC. (CONT'D)

apples, or leaves, but especially about the way things are located in space, their life and color, and the mysterious connection which evolves between myself and the subject.

Joe Meyerowitz has expressed feelings that connect directly to my own. During his interview with Bruce K. MacDonald in Cape Light, MacDonald asks:

How do you arrive at feeling that this will make a photograph?

Meyerowitz responds: The thing itself. The place itself. You walk into a place and that's it. It is other. The place resonates a quality that you respond to. You feel your self in relation to its otherness.

It's like the infinity sign--the distance is so great it comes back on itself. At a given moment, it's the way the light caresses the buildings, the way the chip of the horizon appears in the alleyway, it's the waving of the grass, it's the snap of the curtain. It's everything. It's one whole. At that moment, you step past, into that whole, and it swallows you up.⁵

In photography I have responded on an affective level in the same way Meyerowitz does (PLATES 21 and 22). I have a desire to open doorways for the sake of knowing more about myself, and as I look back at the work I've completed, I feel that each photograph was an exploration of my reactions to forms in space. This somehow caused a response within my psyche.

Kandinsky also comes up with an analysis about the

⁵Meyerowitz, Joel, Cape Light (Little Brown and Company), from the conversation with Bruce K. MacDonald in opening section. (No page number.)
attraction between the artist and subject matter:

Every object has its own life and therefore its own appeal; man is continuously subject to these appeals. But the results are often dubbed either sub or super-conscious. Nature, that is to say the ever-changing surroundings of man, sets in vibration the strings of the piano (the soul) by manipulation of the keys (the various objects with their several appeals).

The impressions we receive which often appear merely chaotic, consist of three elements: the impression of the color of the object, its form, and its combined color and form, i.e., the object itself. At this point the individuality of the artist comes to the front and disposes, as he wills, these three elements. It is clear, therefore, that the choice of object (i.e., of one of the elements in the harmony of form) must be decided only by a corresponding vibration in the human soul; and this is a third guiding principle of inner need.6

Kandinsky was concerned with the world in a deeper sense. As a painter, he sought to grasp psychic states in a very pure way and to show the viewer these insights (PLATES 23 and 24). The belief that every artistic form is the outward manifestation of man's inner life made it possible for this artist to break away from portraying objective reality so that he could create forms and color of his own invention. Rather than transpose and reiterate form he chose to interpret it based on his feelings. Even though a photographer is dealing with a machine, there is still the personal vision which can cause a unique expression to emerge.

It has been one year since my Thesis Show, and during that time I have thought a great deal about this work. Selected from thirty prints were certain ones which I felt were more strong and representational of my concerns. So I have included prints of only those discussed in this report. The slides are complete, showing all prints in the thesis exhibit.

I feel that the work for my thesis is substantial in that I have explored and reached several plateaus. The last one was reached when I used the square format which caused a new direction in my work, as well as an integration of both inanimate and animate objects and the inclusion of more elements.

I have searched for answers and have relied on patterns. I feel that, in an abstract sense, certain forms together express my sense of humor, vitality, warmth, energy, and that the affinity which exists between myself and a particular thing is the result of communication based on these felt connections. I am satisfied with these explanations, and feel that I am much more aware now having had the experience of making these photographs and the opportunity to evaluate them in terms of why they evoke such strong emotions from within myself.

THE END
VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Two Pink X's, Rochester, N.Y. 1978

Plate 3
"Fence with Aqua Leaves, Bethlehem, Pa. 1978" Joyce Silver
Acetate Used As Dodging Tool for brush and pigment

"Fluorescent Rock, Henrietta, N.Y. 1978" Jorge Cubra

Plate 5.
"Brown Bush, Rochester, N.Y. 1978" Jace Ltern
"Red Bush, Pettysford, N.Y. 1971"  - S. Tschudi
Permanent Collection, George Eastman House

Plate 9
Apples, Pittsford, N.Y. 1977

Permanent Collection, George Eastman House
"Leaves Falling, Rochester, N.Y. 1977"
"Two Mailboxes, Boca Raton, Fla 1972" Jay DeCuire
"Several Lime Green Bushes, Henrietta, N.Y. 1977" Culver

Permanent Collection, George Eastman House
"Grass Patch, Rochester, N.Y. 1978"
"Before the Mirror," 1876  Edward Manet
Copy from the book, Cape Light.
"Ballston Beach, Tauro," 1976 Joel Meyerowitz
Copy from the book, _Cape Light_
Kandinsky's "Composition IV"  
1st sketch 1913, Oil on Canvas
"Mixed Mats," 1965
Larry Poons

Plate 25
A THESIS EXHIBITION OF PHOTOGRAPHS

JOYCE CULVER

APRIL 7 - APRIL 14, 1979

M.F.A. Photography Gallery
Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, N.Y.

Opening reception: April 7, 1979  8-10 p.m.
Joe with Tom and John and Larry
Dee Keller and Elaine Milton pose with me for a shot.
Charles Werberg with another Charles
The general crowd