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TREES

by

STEPHEN W. SMALL

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  
August, 1980

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Kathleen Collins, Chairperson

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Owen Butler

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8/28/80

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Roger Mertin

03 Feb 1981

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
COLLEGE OF GRAPHIC ARTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
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Title of Thesis TREES

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## INTRODUCTION

This Thesis project was intended as an investigation into a specific feeling that I experience while photographing trees. The feeling I set out to capture is the sense of energy and mystery that I find in certain spaces structured by trees and the light around them. The energy is that of growth. The mystery is that of a spiritual connection, felt but, not understood.

The struggle of this Thesis was development of my ability to recognize that sense of energy and mystery in a place, and, then, to record that sense faithfully.

My ability to perceive a scene and its applicability to the Thesis was governed by my understanding of the concept and attitude of the Thesis itself as well as by a whole range of conscious and unconscious aesthetic constructs. The natural variation and redefinition of these attitudes and constructs gave the Thesis its sense of growth and diversity; but, also made intellectualization and emotional consistency a broader task.

With the recognition of the space to be photographed came a second group of problems. First, was the maintaining of the moment of perception enough to translate it onto film. Second, was the accurate translating of the perception onto the film, after modifications and judgments were made to emphasize the perception of the energy of the scene. And, finally, it was necessary to develop the ability to recognize this sense of energy in the photographs and to organize it in the printing, editing, and hanging of the show.

Thesis Proposal  
 Submitted for the MFA Photography Degree  
 Rochester Institute of Technology  
 Stephen W. Small, candidate

12 February 1980

Title:

## TREES

### I. Purpose of the Thesis

To make photographs which recreate the sense of power and poetic mystery that I experience in the viewing of certain trees and their settings.

### II. Scope of the Thesis

" Everything has a secret soul, which is silent more often than it speaks." Kandinsky (1947).

Throughout the history of art, there has been a strong alliance between artist and primal symbology. My earlier painting dealt heavily with this use of symbols and marks to evoke a sense of poetic mystery and revealed order. In my recent photographic work I have found myself returning to this same problem.

"It is the artist's mission to penetrate as far as may be towards the secret ground where primal law feeds growth." Klee (1966).

The symbol that has created the strongest reaction in me has been the tree. It is there that I have found the imagery that has been the well-spring of the most growth.

This Thesis Project is intended as an investigation into a specific feeling that I experience while photographing trees. The feeling I have set out to capture is the sense of power and mystery that I feel in certain spaces structured by trees and the light around them. The power is that of growth, the mystery is that of a spiritual connection felt but, not understood

### III. Procedure

The photographs will continue to be made with an 8 X 10 view camera for its propensity towards contemplation and faithfulness to feeling. To this date I have made approximately one hundred negatives dealing with the thesis. I will photograph and print through April of 1980, at which time I shall hang a show of 25-35 Contact prints. The Thesis Report should be completed no later than September, 1980.

### IV. Sources- See Bibliography

Thesis advisory board:

Kathleen Collins, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, Rochester Institute of Technology, Chairperson.

Owen Butler, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences, Rochester Institute of Technology.

Roger Mertin, Department of Fine Arts, University of Rochester.

## I. Development of the Thesis Concept.

The groundwork for the Thesis began in the Fall of 1979. I had recently bought an 8 X 10 Deardorff and was spending most of my time establishing a working relationship with it. This camera was chosen for its ability to record faithfully detail, tone, and texture. It evolved, however, to be invaluable to the Thesis for the directness of the ground glass to picture relationship. The large view gave an awareness of the organization of the photograph not found with smaller cameras. A feeling felt while viewing the ground glass image was preserved in the print. While this was enjoyable in the early work, it was critical in the final photographs.

The early work had very little to do with trees. It was, in fact, largely very severe. It gravitated towards formalistic game playing with architectural elements. As I became more familiar with the camera, no longer needing to be concerned with its operation, I became more dissatisfied with the severity of the hard edge; the games and exercises were no longer enough.

I began to photograph trees within stark architectural settings. In a short time I isolated my interest to the trees as being the reason for the photographs and not the space, as I had once believed. It was in the winter while visiting North Carolina and so happy to see trees and grass, that I became aware of a sense of strength and spiritual relationship with the trees. This feeling was borne out upon the printing of the photographs. The continual sense of energy I received from them made me choose this vein as my thesis.

## II. The Taking of the Photographs

It was in February of 1980 that I started photographing with a firm concept of the Thesis in mind. Having direction to the work gave me, for the first time, an idea of how to proceed with making the photographs and also made clear to me the problems I would encounter.

I was of the opinion that I had a lack of experience and knowledge concerning how men had thought about trees and their spiritual significance. I began reading about trees, covering topics ranging from accounts of Celtic tree mythology to the Jungian concepts of the tree as a psychological symbol. I found all of these sources interesting and some even enlightening. They, most assuredly, served to broaden my base of understanding for my feelings concerning the tree. I felt, however, that these readings lessened the directness of my experience with the tree and, therefore, with my work.

I decided to spend my time in more applied pursuit of the spirit of the tree. I studied the trees themselves, both in person and through the paintings and photographs of others. Of perhaps greatest impact was the esthetic and spiritual kinship I saw in the works of Alvin Langdon Coburn,(1978). He had developed a keen awareness that shone through in his photographs. It was through this type of study that I realized it is more important to develop a sensitivity and a link with that which you photograph than it is to construct a well composed picture.

With this concept in mind, I concentrated on developing a greater awareness and receptiveness to the visual and emotional energy of the tree. This effort became the central focus of the Thesis. My earlier formalistic game play became more subservient to the observation of the effects of power and mystery exhibited by the tree. My photographs became much more a trial of attachment and detachment rather than a conscious "making" of a good picture. I found that it was far better to maintain contact with what I was photographing than to concentrate on form. Photography became a state of mind in which I would subliminally perceive a field of energy and set the camera to capture it. The "looking" for pictures gave way to the "finding" of pictures. I became more open to the gifts, surprises, and heretofore undiscovered accidents that could make my



photographs. The sense of awareness and perceptiveness while photographing became the photograph.

This sense of awareness was not a uniform repeatable constant. It was, instead, continually varying and shifting, sometimes coming, sometimes not. At times it would key into a joyful relationship with nature, at other times it would become aware of a darker, more penetrating somberness. There would be a dialogue between the energy of the place and my momentary state of mind to determine which photograph I perceived.

In this sense, my world was as much conditioned by my perception of it, as my perception was conditioned by my world. The awareness/world relationship was a constant flux of reference and redefinition altering my view of what I saw and what I photographed.

As my perceptiveness increased, I gleaned a greater understanding of how the various components of the scene orchestrated the effects of energy and mystery. I had been asking myself many questions about the energy of the scene. Was the energy created by the tree itself? The form of the tree certainly gives the image of growth and struggle. But was not the setting critical to the conveyance of the impression of energy? It played the greatest part in emphasizing the growth and structure of the tree. Or, was it the light? The light was magic. It could reveal or it could shadow in mystery all that gave the photograph its power. The same scene with only slight changes of light went from ordinary to high energy and back down again in moments.

It was in answer to these questions that most of the photographs were made. The energy was there. But, why? It was only with an understanding of this that I would be able to know how best to capture the sense of awe that I had learned to perceive.

As I photographed, I found that, indeed, it was not the tree alone that

created the sense of power to the place. It was evident that the total effect was derived from a synthesis of varying ratios from picture to picture, of the visual strength of the tree, the light and the shadow, and the place itself. All of these factors came together to create a sense of energy and activity in the visual field. Trees were the central object of contemplation. But, light became the emotive force. It would pick out some parts of the tree and the environment, bringing their forces to the surface, sublimating other areas for contrast.

Like light, the use of the background became a powerful tool for emphasis of the energy and mystery of the tree. A tree in the forest merely dissolves into the general mass of life, ceasing to display any of its individual character. A tree, isolated in a suburban setting, will exhibit a more pure and unique form. The tree is held up for a comparative examination, revealing its development and relationship to its space. Sometimes the tree stands in an integrated air of permeation and cohabitation with its surroundings. The growth is peaceful and symbiotic. At other times, the tree will stand alone in violent contrast to its settings, giving more a feeling of exerted energy than growth.

This question of isolation versus integration was constant throughout the Thesis. It was a question of how and when to display the two types of energy and the two ways of existence. It was never clear cut and definitive, with elements of both working in every scene. My choice of emphasis was dictated by my feeling for the scene and my understanding of it. It was in the adjustment of emphasis that the only questions of technique arose. The 8 X 10 camera proved to be the perfect tool for its propensity toward contemplated orchestration of the comparative strengths of the visual elements. The groundglass allowed me to both view the picture as a completed whole and to separate out the visual forces at work. It was possible to see the finished photograph, to view the level of integration or isolation as it would be when printed and on

the wall. The problems of integration were solved if what I felt in the scene were preserved or enhanced on the ground glass. The achievement of this translation from life to ground glass was difficult at first. In the early photographs the adjustments were conscious and labored. The later and better photographs were taken more as a reflex to the power of the subject. Only enough manipulation was made to translate the feeling to the film.

Even more than the framing of the view, the choice of film proved to be of great impact in both the translation of energy from the scene and the pictorial integration or isolation of the tree itself. I found black and white and color to be equally applicable in the work. The black and white seemed more capable of rendering an overall visual field based in an encompassing tone or permeation of light. Color proved more capable of the isolation of objects for comparison or emphasis. Color also was solely suited to the rendering of the stronger effects of light and shadow, especially when this light had emotional value due to a color cast. The choice of film was made according to a visceral judgment as to which would maintain the particular sense or awareness of the scene in the photograph.

With a sensitivity developed, the integration and framing decided, and the film choice made, the photograph was exposed.

### III. The Production of the Show

With the negative made, the hardest work was over. Printing was a matter of maintaining, as much as possible, the sense of awareness felt in the original scene. This took no special skill; just awareness and patience.

The editing was another matter. The shooting lasted for eight months. The first picture was taken during the second week of September. The last was taken three days before the show (April 12-18, 1980). The editing was an on-

going process with prints moving in and out over the entire period. Judgments were made on the basis of the applicability of the photographs to my intent and on how effectively they transmitted the feeling of the energy of the scene. Only about five photographs were held as alternate choices for the final hanging. These were used to ease transitions in the manner in which the show was hung.

I found that there was no single photograph which stood as an encapsulated view of the Thesis. Though this made the work more difficult to classify and condense, it left a truer impression of the breadth and scope of the types of energy exhibited by the scenes.

The final show presented a diverse group of thirty photographs taken over a seven month period.

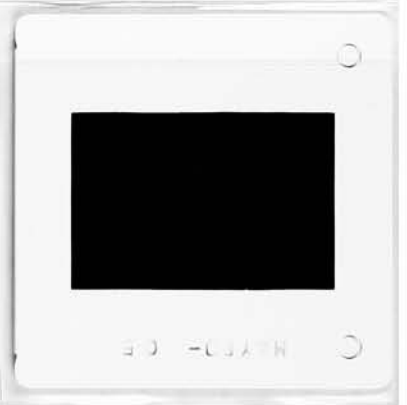
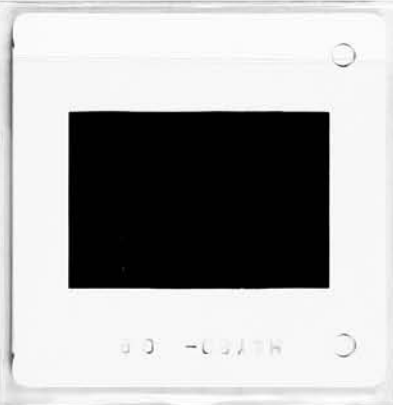
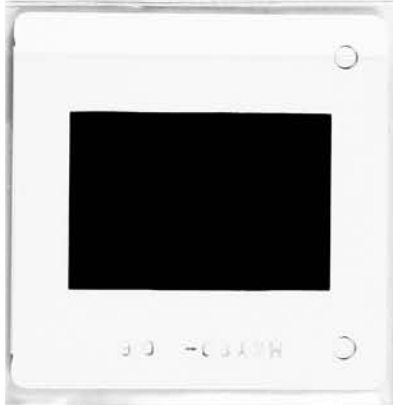
With the help of Owen Butler, editing and hanging the show on the final day brought new understanding of the work. The non-linear arrangement of the photographs had brought new and important connections. Pieces with little apparent relationship seen separately, bonded together to give meaning to the visions of energy and mystery displayed.

#### IV. Conclusion

Reflecting upon the Thesis, I realize that the way I see and think has changed greatly because of it. I can see more deeply into my feelings and my reactions are more intuitive. I have gotten a more personal attachment to things around me, making me more comfortable with my world and my photography. This Thesis is not a finite project; I shall continue to use it to develop further that particular type of sensitivity for which I seek.

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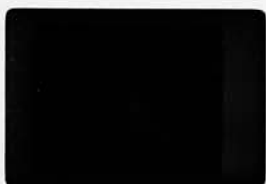
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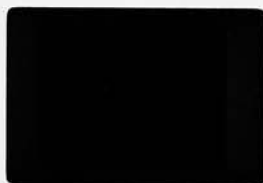
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