The photograph as symbolic presentation of subjective reality

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THE PHOTOGRAPH AS SYMBOLIC PRESENTATION OF SUBJECTIVE REALITY

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"I have no program, only the inexplicable longing to grasp what I see and feel and to find the purest expression for it. These are phenomena which I can approach by means of art, but not with thoughts or words."

- Schmidt Rotluff
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INTRODUCTION

The essence of life, of experience, can be conveyed only through a symbol. 1/ In these photographs, in transforming three dimensions into two dimensions, an attempt has been made to create a symbolic language for certain subjective feeling-states.

In this report the word symbol has a specific definition. The photographs do not function as symbols in the usual sense of the word. In common usage, a symbol is something which refers to or stands for something else, or which points to something beyond itself. 2/ However, to quote Susan Langer concerning the art symbol, the function of the art symbol is primarily one of "formulating experience and presenting it objectively for contemplation, logical intuition, recognition and understanding. 3/

It is this definition of the art symbol as applied to photographs that has been my concern. In this thesis the attempt was to articulate directly felt experiences by means of the photograph. These feeling-states are expressed visually not verbally since verbal language is inadequate.

The photographs present these experiences symbolically. They visually articulate certain feelings which cannot otherwise be expressed. The photographs do not refer to something beyond themselves, but always refer back to themselves for their expression.

The structure of the photographs, that is, the specific arrangement of shapes and forms within the frame is the thing which can be demonstrated objectively, pointed out to exist.

On the other hand, the subjective feeling-states which are not represented directly in the photograph cannot be pointed out. They are either apprehended or not by the viewer.

The photographs exist as a reality, however, whether or not the apprehension of expressiveness takes place. They can be demonstrated to be an articulation of tonal relationships on a two dimensional surface.

1.
The photographs then can be apprehended on different levels. On one level, through the perception of forms and relations between the forms, and on another level, through expression as a symbol.


3/ Ibid. p. 133.
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

Purpose:
To rediscover the sensuous
the primitive and the mysterious
through photographs

Submitted by:
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3.
As a photographer, particular objects and situations have a certain mystery which lures me into responding. This mystery derives from relationships that I create between people and their immediate environment and objects and their surroundings.

When I remove a person or object from a normal environment and create a new situation, new meanings can be derived from the newly created context. Since the visual elements are juxtaposed in an unusual way, everyday expectations are challenged.

Even in a normal environment, i.e., one in which the person or object is usually found, I can create a sense of mystery by their placement in specific relationships. For instance, I can place a person or object in an environment so that it seems to absorb them, even control them. At other times, I can create situations in which the person seems totally oblivious to what surrounds him and seems mentally removed from what is happening around him.

This situation occurs frequently with children. That is, while I am photographing them in a particular place, they seem mentally to be in another place entirely. I respond to children strongly since they are not reluctant to show their emotions and are very free in their ability to gesture - to capture what is for me a very subconscious feeling in a single movement and expression.

My response to what I photograph is based on things that I recognize within me and things that I find. The situations created from these moments of response (the photographs) are the only real things capable of having any meaning, or expression.
What I create, the photograph, may have nothing at all to do with the reality of the scene itself as others may perceive it during the moment of exposure. The finished photograph takes on its own meaning, becomes a reality itself.

I can only photograph those things that I already know. They may be known consciously or not, but they are things which only the photograph can say adequately. Taking the picture becomes a rediscovery of those things I have known and possibly forgotten. Then the photograph becomes a reminder; it exists, as Emit Gowin says, as a "link between us and ourselves." 1/

The initial experience of picture taking is a moment of response to things within me and things that I find. Hopefully, the image that results from this initial involvement will somehow extend and clarify those feelings present at that time so that the particular perception can be prolonged, so that the particular set of feelings can be nourished.

THESIS PROPOSAL
PROCEDURES

This Thesis is viewed as a continuing investigation into the phenomena which surround me and to which I respond. It is, as I am working on it now, and will be, a developing body of work. It will not be concluded after it is hung. I am interested in the progression of my ideas through change, and not in any all encompassing conclusions which may limit the progression of thought.

This Thesis will show development through the inclusion of new ideas, it will also be consistent. Each photograph will exhibit the mystery, the ambiguity that I find and react to in the things that surround me.

This Thesis will take the form of an exhibit of no less than fifteen black and white prints, no smaller than 9 x 13. Photography will be done with a 35mm camera and Black and White Infrared Film.

Grainy films have always fascinated me. I have experimented with High Speed Recording Film, Tri-X and Black and White Infrared. I found that Infrared, because of its grain structure, and its special sensitivity suits my technical and aesthetic needs. Because of these characteristics, detail tends to be lost in the highlights while the blacks go very rich and dark. This situation helps to create the sense of mystery and ambiguity I desire in my prints.
In November, 1973, after looking at a group of photographs on Infrared Film, I became very interested in using and experimenting with it. Specifically, I was captivated by the film's graininess (a softer grain than that evident with High Speed Recording Film) and by the way the highlights appeared to bleach out, causing the detail to be lost. The highlight areas were particularly fascinating as the forms were no longer clearly or sharply defined.

I exposed my first rolls of film during the last week in November at Kodak's recommended ASA of 50, with a red filter. After developing the film in D76 straight, at 68 degrees for 11 minutes (Kodak recommended time), it seemed very dense and overexposed. After printing these first negatives, I decided they were far too grainy and difficult to print. They were also very flat, requiring numbers 5 and 6 Agfa Brovira paper.

Over Christmas vacation in Miami, I made some exposure tests and determined that the film could be exposed at speeds up to 1000 in bright sunlight, which still allowed for printable negatives. However, at the high ASA, the grain became negligible. I did not want to lose all the grain and I adjusted the ASA to 50 again.

This slow speed worked in Miami because of the bright sunlight. I found that the negatives exposed in Miami at ASA 50 were far easier to print than the negatives exposed at the same ASA in Rochester.

The ideal exposure condition for me since I was using black and white Infrared Film, was bright sunlight. I kept my ASA at 50, since I kept losing too much grain at higher speeds. In bright sunlight the negatives were far less flat than those exposed under a grey sky. The negatives exposed in Rochester, since bright sunlight was unusually not available, were always very flat and required very contrasty printing paper.
Throughout, a Nikon with a 24mm lens was used. The lens was used primarily for the great depth of field and for the feeling of deep space and distance.

Throughout the printing, Agfa Brovira 111, grades 3 through 6 was used. This paper seemed to give me the boost in contrast I always needed with infrared film.

During the period of time spent photographing and developing, from November, 1973 through March, 1974, D76 developer was used consistently, straight, at 68 degrees. Development time varied from 10 to 12 minutes, never exceeding 12 minutes.

A rather large format for the pictures, 12 x 18 inches, was felt to be appropriate for a number of reasons. First of all, I have always enjoyed looking at large photographs and not having to poke my nose into a print in order to see it. I also found that by making my prints larger, I saw things in them I really never saw before. That is, certain relationships between the forms became stronger and the space seemed to change dramatically.

In terms of the way I see, the size seemed just right. When I take a picture, I see more in terms of form at first. The content or idea follows later. The large size of the prints allowed me to again be involved in seeing abstractly.

I felt that because my prints were simply constructed, in terms of the number of elements contained within the frame, they could be presented in a larger format without becoming visually confusing.

Another important consideration for arriving at this size was my concern for grain. I enjoyed the increased grainularity and thought it enhanced my images. It seemed to add another dimension to the surface quality and to the perception of the images themselves.
Many of the prints in my thesis are images of children. As I mentioned in my thesis proposal, I have always responded to certain things children do, in terms of gesture, in a very instinctive way. Children seem mysterious to me at times because they never seem to be in the same place at the same time. That is, the reality of their physical presence seems different than the reality of their spiritual presence. Even when captured on film, there is evidence of some kind of change taking place. They seem able to exist in many different levels of reality at the same time.

The children, then, act as catalysts for moments of response, along with other situations. In my thesis proposal, I described other types of situations (either created or found) which serve as triggering devices for response. These are situations in which usually one person is placed in a very specific environment. I want to be able, by placing a person in a specific place, to bring about a comparison of the person to his surroundings. I want to be able to infer certain ideas from the relationship described.

Usually the people in my photographs are not making direct visual contact with the viewer. In some photographs, the children have their eyes closed, or half-closed. In others, the person's back is turned toward the camera.

Along with the graininess of the film, which eliminates sharply defined contours, the above are devices used to intensify the perception of ambiguity and mystery in the final print.
CONCLUSION

This thesis is the culmination of many ideas with which I have been concerned yet it is also a catalyst for further explorations.

I have always responded sensuously to surface and to form. At first this concern was manifested in a technical way. It became a search for the way a picture could feel in terms of its surface texture. I wanted a grainy image and found the way to achieve it through infrared film.

But more importantly, the way a picture could feel took on a greater significance beyond a technical exploration. The idea of translating non-verbal subjective experiences into visual form was what interested me. These are directly felt experiences but have no specific names. 1/

For example, could I find the equivalent in visual form for what it feels like to emerge from a cold room and bask momentarily in a ray of sunshine? Or, what does it feel like to be in that half-conscious, half-dreamlike state of utter drowsiness? 2/Could I find a visual equivalent for the feeling of being underwater in a warm ocean oblivious to everything but the water and the body's weightlessness.

Verbal language cannot so succintly, so intensely express the essence of these feeling-states as can a visual statement. The photographs say visually what cannot be said verbally.

The concern then was to create in photographs, symbols for these subjective feelings, feelings aroused by a sensual response to form.

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