Photo Abstraction: A Camera Vision

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Thesis Report
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Submitted by: John J. Head
Date: July 1977

Thesis Advisors:

Charles Werberig
Assistant Professor
SPAS, RIT

John Cox
Associate Educational Specialist
NTID, RIT

Kathleen Collins
Instructor
SPAS, RIT

Approval by Graduate Committee:
Chairman:
Date:
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Title: PHOTO ABSTRACTION - A Camera Vision

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree
School of Photographic Arts & Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

Submitted by: John J. Head
Date: October 1976

Thesis Advisors:

Charles Werberig
Assistant Professor
SPAS, RIT

John Cox
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NTID, RIT

Kathleen Collins
Instructor
SPAS, RIT

Approval by Graduate Committee:
Chairman:
Date:
I. Purpose of the Thesis:
The discovery, within the everyday environment, of abstraction which can be made from reality, using photographic vision as a limit.

II. Scope of the Thesis:
One of my interests in photography has always been the nature of the medium itself: the way in which the process works; the ability of the photographer to select, edit or frame objects from the daily environment and produce a private photographic vision; the struggle to transform the commonplace by separating it from the everyday and recording that image on film and paper as a unique object of contemplation.

Seeing something apart from its overall surroundings or function results in abstraction. To me this is one of the most vital aspects of photography. I would like to explore it. I would like to document objects with the camera, isolating them from their usual environs and thereby give them new meaning that no longer has any external reference.

This concept of extraction/abstraction is similar to the ideas of Marcel Duchamp, realized in his "ready-mades". He converted the commonplace object into a new experience of that object, place, event, etc. I want to explore and create the same concept photographically.
The thesis will be made using color materials. The camera format may vary from 35mm to 120 or 4 x 5. The reason for this is to use different kinds of camera viewing limitations. The final prints will be 11 x 14 or 16 x 20 Ektacolor.

III. Procedure:

1) Review principles of abstract artists. Review work of photographers and writings of photographers who photograph abstractly (such as Siskind, Minor White, Maholy Nagy and others). Observations will be noted for possible use in the thesis report. The intent is not to mimic these photographers; merely to obtain a historical view of recent photoabstraction.

2) Photograph as often as possible and on a regular basis.

3) Process film, contact print, edit and test print.

4) Review work with thesis advisors. (Work will be critiqued in progress on 3 occasions.)

5) Re-print and prepare work for thesis show.

6) Prepare thesis report.

7) Expected date of completion is April 1977.
Dedication and Thanks:

To Susan and Allison, mother and daughter, who taught me in their way what life is all about.

To my thesis advisors, Charles, Kathy, and John, for their hours of help and criticism.
Abbreviated Background Information:

I graduated from the Pennsylvania State University in March 1972 with a B.F.A. degree in painting and photography. This provided a strong influence in the creative and visual aspects of art and photography. While at PSU I was employed at the University Division of Instructional Services in the Still Photo Department. Here I acquired experience in various practical and technical areas of photography over a three-year period. After six months of full-time work at U.D.I.S./Still Photo, I was offered a photo position in time-motion analysis at the University. On March 22, 1972 I was informed of my acceptance into the MFA photography program at RIT, and I chose the latter. After relocation and a series of part-time jobs, I accepted a teaching position in photography at NTID. I started teaching first-year photography students in August of 1972 and simultaneously began my MFA course work on a part-time basis. By spring of 1975 I had completed all the required course work for the MFA degree. In October 1976 I wrote a thesis proposal and chose a thesis board. The work progressed and was reviewed on three occasions by my thesis board. The thesis show was held on March 20, 1977. Five years had passed from acceptance into the MFA program to the thesis show. Those years for academic, professional, and personal reasons contained a vast amount of growth, success, and happiness. A photographic analogy of these respective events seems appropriately accurate: to see and focus, to record, and to share.
Equipment Rationale:

In photography today it is always tempting to become too concerned with equipment. That is, equipment for its own sake, or because it is new or different. This was especially tempting for me since NTID has a fine selection of photographic hardware. But I feel as consumers we are easily seduced by the extravagant marketing of photographic equipment. As a precautionary measure I chose to set a limit on the equipment, concentrating on the cerebral element of creativity rather than the technical.

I have always admired Mies Van der Rohe's statement "Less is more." It can be applied to so many situations. However, less is only more, if the less that is used is the best. Less for its own sake is simply not enough. One needs to find a truly exceptional minimum and make the most from it.

For these reasons I decided to use a 35mm Nikon F camera with one lens, a 50mm Nikkor Macro. This system allowed me roll film, ease of composition and camera editing, a "normal" 50° angle of view, and sharp focusing. I faithfully used a tripod and Luna Pro exposure meter. The film was Kodacolor II and processed according to C-41 process recommendations. Kodacolor II at that time was rated at ASA 80. I exposed the negatives at ASA 50; it seemed that the overexposure gave more color saturation and contrast. This also increased negative density and printing times but was not a major problem. All prints were made with a Chromega D-6 enlarger and 50mm Schneider lens. The printing method was trial and error with the use of magnification formulas for enlarger height changes. The color correction was subjective. Some prints were
"shifted" to become warmer or cooler than the original scene. All negatives were fully printed; cropping took place only in the camera. The prints were on Ektacolor 37 RC paper with an "N" surface. They were 13 1/2" x 9" on 11 x 14 paper. Using Ektaprint two-step chemistry, the prints were processed in a Colenta sheet paper processor (Expediter). In the negative and print processing the machines were monitored using control strips and control charts. Forty-eight final prints were made for the thesis show (see slide set), twenty-five 16x20 posters were made for campus publicity. (Most were stolen before the show was up.) All prints were mounted with Seal drymount tissue on 16x20 boards and 45° bevel mats were cut to over mat the prints. The mount board was ivory rag board. After the thesis show was displayed, the 48 prints were duplicated onto Ektachrome Duping Film for a slide record to be included as part of the thesis report. One representative image was selected and printed to 8 1/2" x 11" and a reduced copy of the thesis poster was printed for inclusion in the report.
A Statement of Project Analysis:

The underlying principle of this thesis is photography as a process of selection. "The photographer's problem is to see not simply the reality before him, but the still, invisible picture, and to make his choice in terms of the later." This statement by John Szarkowski illustrates how a photographer extracts his image from a larger reality. When successful, this intuitive process is as Weston said "the strongest way of seeing." A photographer is faced with a world of possible choices. He does not synthesize, as a painter, but selects a whole image. This is why I used a reference to Marcel Duchamp and his idea of "readymades" in my thesis proposal. Duchamp used a process much like photovision. He selected and removed from the environment objects for display within the context of the gallery. In some cases the object was transformed or altered by the addition of other ready made pieces. But, in most cases, the objects remained "pure" and were simply shown from a different angle or in a new context. The parallels to photography are clear. Edward Weston points out the infinite number of these choices: "Putting one's head under the focusing cloth is a thrill....to pivot the camera slowly around watching the image change on the ground glass is a revelation, one becomes a discoverer...and finally the complete idea is there...." A photographer also develops a way of seeing without his camera; it is a mental/visual framing. The process is one of coordinating a certain amount of accident (time and place) with a set of visual references to composition, color, perception, etc. The unique aspect is that the
photographer starts his image-finding with the frame. Szarkowski says that "the frame is the beginning of a picture's geometry." The selection process is, therefore, crucial in the success or failure of the photograph. It is necessary to fill the frame with only critical information selected from a larger subject. My thought was to select from reality portions of it which when shown apart became new objects. The other premise was that the kind of selection would be abstract. Central to the idea is the camera's ability to frame and fragment things.

My operational definition of abstraction was flexible but paralleled the principles of many abstract painters. In some cases I used the basic design elements of balance, shape, and color to create non-recognizable photographs. These prints were akin to the ideas of some abstract expressionist painters (Hoffman, Rothko, Newman, etc.) and similar to some photographs by Aaron Siskind (mostly his walls and cityscapes). The subject's distance to the camera was a major factor in this work. The idea at first glance is simple enough. Get close to anything and it is abstract. However, I did not want to make photomicrographs and show abstraction through the extreme close-up but wanted to select it from a section or part of a larger subject.

Thus, the camera to subject distance became a concern because of its influence on the subject's proportions. In many cases I tried to choose large subjects and frame parts of them so I would get several large areas within the frame to create bold, full shapes. This was a striving for simplicity and essential content. The result was a mixture
of minimalist and abstract-expressionist ideas, much along the lines of Robert Motherwell's or Helen Frankenthaler's paintings.

In other photographs the definition of abstraction included references to reality (identifiable objects) seen within an abstract context. The frame did not include enough information to identify or decode the complete subject, and, as a result, the image had a surrealistic quality. Some information was given; a rock, for example, could be identified but not its location or surrounding objects. So the process of decoding was started but stopped by not giving enough supplementary data to make an accurate decision.

In all of my work the edge of the frame was important. A "photographic" way of seeing has been incorporated into our visual perception. The viewfinder, a window through which all photographers, amateur and professional, see the world, is a selection device. It includes only so much of a subject based on camera distance and lens length. This fragmentation of reality has caused the edge of the frame to become important. I think we almost take this idea for granted. However, a look at Western painting shows that subjects are centered or balanced within the frame of the rectangle. The painting is within the border, giving a feeling of harmony and containment. Historically, Japanese printmakers like Haronobu and Hokusai used the paper's edge to emphasize and create a more three-dimensional effect. This idea was first brought to Western painting through the influence of photography and Japanese prints.
The significance of the edge was seen by Degas who practiced photography and incorporated its effects in his paintings. One photographic effect is "cropping," the placement of a subject's parts in a position of harmony or tension within the rectangle. A Degas ballet rehearsal might show large open spaces with only parts of some dancers; those near the edge would be "cut-off". This gives the picture an "accidental" quality and creates a feeling of a split second glance at the subject. Obviously, this is exactly the quality of a photograph and of the photographic moment.

As I said earlier, this way of seeing has been incorporated into 20th century perception and is now almost taken for granted. In my work "framing" with the camera was critical to my interpretation of the subject.

Another critical aspect of my thesis was the use of color. My work could not have been done without it. In many instances the colors within a scene would be the first thing I would respond to. I would then further explore the subject by mentally framing it to see if, in fact, I could make a photograph. At this same time I would also consider elements of design and principles of photography. This bond between photographic insight and technical proficiency is interestingly expressed in the form of an equation by Johannes Itten: subconscious perception + intuitive thought + positive knowledge = composition of a creative image. Itten's statement shows three related and nearly simultaneous aspects of photographic selection which quickly break one's perceptions into critical parts. However, no equation or any other rule can make creative photographs; they simply serve to illustrate the process:

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Using both the technical and creative aspects of photography, allowed me flexibility with the final image. As earlier discussed, my principle of "less is more" was followed. In most cases the final prints were subjective interpretations of the scenes' color. This was simply a matter of making several prints with variations in "normal" color balance and choosing the most successful print.

Numerous critique sessions were held both formally with my thesis advisors and informally with friends. The result was a unified, sequenced body of work ready for display.

I have always felt in my photographic work the importance of Clive Bell's advice; the artist should bring nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions...nothing but a sense of form and color and three dimensional space."
March 22, 1972

Mr. John J. Head

Dear Mr. Head:

Program: MFA, Photography
Fall, 1972

It is my pleasure to inform you that the Graduate Admissions Committee has offered you acceptance as a graduate student in the above mentioned program.

To insure that we can be of maximum service to you, and to avoid the possibility of overlooked details, we ask that you give careful attention to the enclosed information.

Sincerely,

George C. Hedden
Director of Admissions

GCH: mb
Enc.
#944
Rochester Institute of Technology

Office Memo

To
Supervisor Mars - RIT Security

From
Dr. Lothar Engelmann, Dean of CGAP

Date
March 14, 1977

Subject
Unlocking 07 on 3/20

This is to inform you that John Head has permission to have Building 07-B opened on Sunday March 20 between 2:30 and 6:00 p.m. for the purpose of an MFA Thesis Reception in Rm. 07-3030, the MFA Gallery.
2 March, 1971

Mr. John J. Head, Jr.

Dear Mr. Head:

Enclosed is the corrected description of the M.F.A. Program in Photography, plus admissions materials which outline the procedure for application.

There are no scholarship funds for students in this program but there are a few graduate assistantships, which pay a stipend and provide full tuition waiver. These are usually available only to applicants who have an exceptional background in photography.

If you plan to apply I would suggest haste. About half of the available openings in the program were filled at an evaluation meeting late in February. We are having another evaluation meeting late in March, which will probably leave only a few more applicants to be selected.

Sincerely yours

Arnold Sorvari, Coordinator, M.F.A. Program
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
To: Mr. George Hedden

Date: September 6, 1972

Subject: MFA student, John J. Head

1. Mr. Head will be teaching in NTID for the coming year. This will prevent his full time participation in the MFA program, but he may continue as a part-time student.

Henry C. Beck
Professor of Photography
MFA Coordinator, SPAS
JOHN HEAD

MFA Thesis Show

PHOTO ABSTRACTION
A CAMERA VISION

the MFA Gallery at RIT
School of Photography

March 20 to 26

Opening on Sunday March 20 from 3 to 5