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In Support of Color Photography

Color printing methods developed as expressive and interpretive techniques in photography have not received general acceptance by photographers of established reputation. Indeed, some and probably most photographers who became known internationally before the invention of color film have rejected color photography as a creative medium. The criticism to which color photography has been subjected is based on an extremely closed-minded evaluation of techniques which the critics themselves have not been willing to take time and effort to master, leaving the exploitation of these techniques to commercial interests in the advertising and promotional fields where artistic sensibilities have failed to attain a high level of expression. Moreover, it seems likely that the rejection reflects an antipathy to the massive output of 35mm slides by amateurs who too frequently subject their captive audiences to tedious and indiscriminate slide shows. But these are not the criteria by which the more serious attempts at creative expression in color photography should be judged.

The principal argument against color photography put forward by one eminent photographer (Ansel Adams) is that color methods restrict interpretive freedom by greatly increasing the literal quality of the finished product. This critic quite rightly insists that interpretation is an essential ingredient in representational art, but fails to see that color manipulation can be used to enhance interpretation in a manner similar to the

way in which control of tonal values is used in black and white photography. In making a color print by the three-color additive process the number of controls available [to the technician] are considerably greater than in black and white printing. Thus, with three images assembled to produce the final print, separate control of density and contrast of each one is possible. The combination will then surely affect the density, contrast, and color balance to whatever degree is desired in the resulting print. It is not necessary, nor is it often advisable, that the print be an exact copy of the original scene; in fact it is very difficult if not impossible to make such a precise copy. Therefore, by the very nature of the process, as in black and white photography as well, the print is bound to be an interpretation. The success of the print does not depend on whether it is an interpretation or a literal rendition, but rather on how appealing and convincing the interpretation is. This is where the skill and sensitivity of the photographer enters in, just as it does, too, in mono-chromal photography. Of course, a major element in assuring the success of a photograph - its acceptance by viewers - is to be found in the photographer's selective ability, that is, in his skill in choosing a part of the total subject before him to record that will convey to others an emotion akin to that which the scene aroused in him. In photographing nature or any aspect of the objective world the photographer's selection should imply a larger world than the narrow image he extracted from it. He hopes his audience

will imagine more - perhaps something of his own feelings - than simply the details of the limited fragment he chose from the whole scene. He intends his photograph to carry an implicit meaning beyond its explicit content.

This discussion to some extent anticipates my answer to even more general and uncompromising criticism of photography of nature annunciated by another famous photographer (Walker Evans). In what may have been a reckless moment he has been quoted as saying that in photography color is vulgar, beauty is unimportant, and nature is trivial; that Man and his works alone are significant. Well, color is certainly common in the sense of its ubiquitousness in the environment. The relevance of beauty is certainly tied to the individualistic emotional appreciation of aesthetic content. The photographs of the social scene by this artist do have an aesthetic appeal to his admirers, and presumably this aesthetic appeal to him had much influence on his choice of subjects. The disparagement of nature is a point of view difficult to support convincingly because in the broadest sense the whole outside world of nature includes man himself. But accept the dichotomy between man and nature as to their influence on art, still, the inconsistancy in rejecting nature out of hand remains insupportable. From the time of cave painting, before the beginning of recorded history, nature has inspired the creative activities of men, and during all of recorded history since then the influence of nature on man's artistic expressions has been undeniably

dominant. If this critic intended to confine his rejection of nature solely to its influence on photography, he places photography in a unique class beyond the arts, which even those photographers who agree with his other conclusions could not accept.

Color photography was originally proposed to me by a publisher as a technique for unambiguously depicting birds. I accepted the challenge and discovered as time passed that I was beginning to see and think of other subjects in terms of their color content. This led to an interest in Henry David Thoreau and to a realization that his writings could better be illustrated in color than in black and white because his preoccupation with nature encompassed its total content. While I was making photographs for IN WILDNESS IS THE PRESERVATION OF THE WORLD I became conditioned to viewing nature in color terms as well as form, and continued after publication to work with color film because for me it was by then a more satisfactory and less restrictive medium in which to express photographic abstractions of nature, which I had become accustomed to visualizing, than was black and white.