Statement - Eliot Porter

Every photograph that is made, whether by one who considers himself a professional or by the tourist who points his Istamatic and pushes a button, is a response to the exterior world, to something perceived outside himself by the person who operates the camera. And whatever is percieved and is translated into a photograph is perceived visually. Without the visual experience there can be no photograph. Auditory and tactile sensations, singly or in combination, are not sufficient to be expressed photographically. This is not to say that other sensations than the visual cannot have an influence on the resulting photograph, and that they may not have a very significant influence. They may determine the interpretation of the visual experience of an exterior object, situation or phenomenon, but they must have something to work on that is connected with seeing. A scene may have musical or tactile connotations to a sensitive person; he may say there is music in these trees, these hills, this shore, as Thoreau exclaimed about nature, "What is the music I hear?" He may say he can physically feel a place; that its mood is depressing and repellent or elevating and joyous, but there is always the scene itself without which these sensations would not be aroused. Some photographers say they are inspired by inner revelations and insights that have no exterior reality, but these influences too work through the eyes on how the exterior world is appreciated.

No doubt there are those who will confuse matters by raising the question of the meaning of reality. I propose to circumvent this philosophical confusion by announcing the premise, for what I have to say, that a world independent of the illusions and hallucinations of the human mind does have concrete existence, and that general agreement on its physical attributes is found in the numerous categories of its contents - in physical, chemical, biological, geological and astronomical classifications. To the esoteric rejoinder that all knowledge is part of a grand illusion of universal mind, I say such a hypothesis is untestable and is therefore meaningless, like the question, "What existed before the beginning?" One must live and work on the premise of objective reality which is the bedrock of the accepted world.

It matters not what theme, what emotional commitments, or even what financial considerations motivate the photographer, he responds to the same kind of stimulus - to what he sees. He may find his inspiration in the social scene, in the lives of people, their joys and sorrows, their accomplishments and tribulations, their exaltations and sufferings, and in the way they meet the vicissitudes of life. Or he may be concerned with the natural scene in all its complexity, variability and flow of dynamic interactions. And, thirdly, his interests might be purely episodic - portraiture to reveal individual character and personality, or studies of nature to demonstrate factual relationships and structure. The boundaries between these categories is infinitely fluid with much over-lapping of departments.

Which point of view is predominant in any one person is determined very largely by the influences in his early life that preconditioned his outlook. The urban child will most likely be concerned more with the human condition than with abstract pristine nature, which to him is probably chaotic, incomprehensible and frightening. Nature lacks the simple order of human society where even the most blatant injustice is more acceptable, because it can be judged in terms of moral precepts, than are the harsh realities of interspecific relationships. If he has been brought up in an intellectual atmosphere his removal from the natural world is more artificial, but simultaneously, by virtue of greater rationality, more accommodatable to it.

Nature is not to be thoughtlessly disparaged, for it holds a venerable place in the arts. Nature was the inspiration of prehistoric man as evidenced by the cave paintings of Lascaux and the pictographs by primitive men in Africa, America and Australia. The pre-Columbian temples of Middle America are decorated with sculptures of snakes, eagles and jaguars. Egyptian temple columns of the Middle and Late Kingdom periods were designed after the lotus flower, and the orders of Greek temple architecture were partly stylized natural forms: the echinus of the Doric capital derived from the sea urchin, and the modillion of the Corinthian capital decorated with acanthus leaves. And landscape painting has a long and venerable history.

But an account of the influence and inspiration that go into the creation of a work of art is not necessary for its justification, which rests on its inherent accepted merit.

A photograph is an abstraction from space and time. Its content is both explicit and implicit, explicit and definitive within the framework of its limiting boundaries and implicit in its suggestion of wider relationships than those depicted - a scene outside evocable through the imagination of the viewer. The area recorded by the camera, optically consistent and logical, is a compression into a small space of a vastly greater reality, a miniaturization of the world we know, which has the effect of enhancing the abstraction and creating a feeling in the viewer, and even in the photographer who made it, of the unreality of the subject. The situation in which photographs of small objects are blown up larger than life is the same; they acquire also the quality of the unbelievable. A house fly magnified to the size of a bird becomes a monster from a world we can never experience. The sense of remoteness from reality is even greater in pictures made by electron microscopes of the internal structures of cells. Because the special optics of the machine sharply defines everything within the field of the instrument, theses pictures of things infinitely small, like astronomical photographs of things infinitely far away, are mysterious, fictional, and beyond experience. But the photograph in itself remains real enough.

A photograph, more than a painting, is an abstraction in time. It celebrates the past. Whether of a particular combination of atmospheric conditions or of the behavior of a living being, man or creature, a photograph is a record of an instant in time, unique and unrepeatable, because the flow of time is apparently unidirectional. A painting on the other hand is a synthesis of many monents perceived in succession by the artist. The photograph freezes the instant, and in the case of moving subjects such as the flight of birds, often in surprising positions not recognized at the time by the photographer himself.

With the development of my interest in photography in the realm of nature, and as I became increasingly concerned with the colors of the world I began to appreciate the complexity of the relationships that drew my attention, which I saw were more clearly illustrated in color than in tones of gray. When photographers reject the significance of color, they are denying one of their most precious biological attributes - color vision - which they share with relatively few other animal species. The exploitation of color vision, one would suppose, would be of paramount importance. It was this complexity in nature that I found irresistible and which, at first, in a very fumbling way, I tried to capture meaningfully on film. I focused on details, and when on occasion I made pictures of the same subject on both color and black and white it was usually the color photograph that carried the message because it contained the information that attracted my attention in the first place.

The color of natural objects is an important feature of them, as important as shape and arrangement, and in fact influences one's evaluation of composition. This is especially true for detail pictures. In landscapes the bolder forms are less dependent for emotional effect on color, which may partly explain my preference, except under exceptional circumstances, for close-up subjects. One exceptional situation I found in Antarctica where the wide view seemed to express better my feelings of desolation and loneliness on that vast empty continent. There photographs made from the air of mountain ranges buried in ice, peak after peak and range behind range projecting through the polar plateau, needed the pale sky to create a sense of insignificance and isolation in a hostile environment.

In the Colorado River canyons the big view conveys less information about the qualities of the young canyon, its origin and life, and expresses less adequately for me the evidence for the powerful forces that combined in its creation, than does closer focusing on cliffs and seeps and alcoves. What I saw on the many trips I made through Glen Canyon and on which I focused my camera evoked visions of centuries of rain near the end of the last continental glaciation, of thundering torrents brown with silt and sand that carried all before them down side canyons. In those wetter days the river and its tributaries cut rapidly into the Mesoaoic sandstone carving narrow, winding slots hundreds of feet deep before the slower precesses of

erosion could widen the walls at the top. The effects of this wild dramatic period were clear for anyone to see, and they were the evidences I tried to record because they were the record of the history of the canyon which the comprehensive view did not reveal so clearly.