

PORTER RETROSPECTIVE: CHAPTER FIVE

The basic content of a photograph that indicates its essential quality is the emotional impact that it carries and is a measure of the author's success in translating into photographic terms his own emotional response to the subject. The more keenly the photographer feels his relationship with the world about him, whatever this world may be, whether it is what we commonly call the natural world or whether it is the world of human society and its products, and the more attuned he is to the most subtle manifestations of its complexity and variety, the more possibility there will be that his interpretation of his experiences will carry conviction. If his vision has become clouded because he has fallen into the rut of formulization, not all the skill at his command will convey to his audience more than superficial feeling. Sensitivity cannot be faked by/trick or device; it has no substitute, and any attempt to replace it with mechanical contrivances is certain to be apparent to the more discerning critics. All photographs do not have to be inspired to be worth making, and routine procedures are not all invalid, but the rare photographs which we are attempting to understand are the result of a force at least very close to inspiration. Style and individuality that characterize the work of each person, making it recognizable, are not denied; in truth, just the opposite is the case. Formulized work becomes impersonal,

and all the individuality of authorship tends to disappear. It unquestionably has its uses, but it is not art.

I have had years to experience in my own work, and observe in the work of others, that the rare photograph, the work of art, is the conscious product of personality, the expression of individuality, of vision and understanding of truth. But before all else a work of art is the creation of love, love for the subject first and for the medium second. Love is the fundamental necessity underlying the need to create, underlying the emotion that gives it form, and from which grows the finished product that is presented to the world. Love is the general criterion by which the rare photograph is judged. It must contain it to be not less than the best of which the photographer is capable.

In my life my chosen subject has been nature and my chosen medium color photography. My devotion to the natural world was the inevitable consequence of childhood environment and family influence; my sense of wonder was first aroused by the physical and biological mysteries of science, and when I became interested in photography, the subjects that occupied my attention were those primarily connected with the natural scene. At the same time, my perception of beauty became intimately associated with nature. This feeling has persisted throughout my life, although with maturity my appreciation for what is beautiful has vastly expanded. And so the aspects of nature that I perceive as beautiful in the conventional sense as well as in a phenomenal sense are what I attempt to record photographically. A feeling

for beauty as a determinant in photography is, perhaps, a more important consideration to photographers of nature than to photographers of the human scene.

Walker Evans, whose work I have always admired, was once quoted as having announced in, I suspect, a reckless, not-to-be-quoted moment, that color is vulgar, nature is trivial, and beauty is unimportant. His work deals exclusively with the human scene. Most of his photographs are beautiful to my eyes, but then we all know the old aphorism about beauty.

As the photographer of the social scene records human emotions and behavior, normal and abnormal, man's relationship to his fellow men and to the environment, and the impact of his activities on his surroundings--how he alters them to his advantage and disadvantage, and how he copes with the situations he creates--so the photographer of the non-human world, the world that exists independently of people, is concerned with the interrelationships between other living things and between them and the physical environment. The study of these relationships is ecology. Ecology in its broadest sense includes man, too, and in its most comprehensive meaning ecology is the study of life.

During my career as a photographer I discovered that color was essential to my pursuit of beauty in nature. Walker Evans was not alone in his criticism of color photography, particularly in its early years. When color film became available in the forties, it was not highly regarded by those photographers who practiced photography as an art. Ansel Adams felt

that color methods restricted interpretive freedom by greatly increasing the literal quality of the finished product. He disparaged color photography as too literal a medium for personal interpretation, which only black and white photography permitted. In color photography one was simply copying nature, whereas in black and white the hues of the subject could be rendered in almost any desired tone of gray, thus allowing a wide range of interpretation.

However, Ansel Adams, like many, failed 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. I believe that when photographers reject the significance of color, they are denying one of their most precious biological attributes--color vision--which we share with relatively few other animal species.

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.

The first objects of nature that attracted me, as might be expected, were the most colorful ones. Of the birds were those with the brightest plumage, while among other subjects were the flowers, lichens, and autumn leaves. Gradually the more subtle hues began to draw my attention--the colors of earth, of decaying wood, of bark, and then the strange colored reflections one sees when one looks for them. To be aware of these relationships of light and color requires an education

of perception, ~~of~~ training oneself to see; not that in my case the process was a purely conscious one which I worked at, for if it had been, the results would have been stiff and contrived, lacking in spontaniety, which in fact they almost always were when I did make a conscious effort. The things and situations I began to see were the result of continuously observing the fine structure of nature.

It was this complexity in nature that I found most 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 picutres of the same subject in 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. I began to see the effect on my subjects of available light, either from a clear blue or from an overcast sky, and I began to recognize that sunlight was often a disadvantage, producing spotty and distracting patterns. The only natural sources of light available for photography are direct and reflected sunlight and skylight, and the way these two sources interact with the environment, by reflecting ^{on} and absorption, produces all sorts of wonderful effects.

One of the most interesting and compelling subjects for me is water in its numerous forms and manifestations. As is well known, it reflects the sky, thus giving us the blue sea on a clear day. In rills and puddles it also reflects the sky, giving some marvelous effects in surroundings of quite different color. These small bodies of water reflect light

which has already been reflected from some other source in which partial absorption has taken place. Thus the green vegetation beside a pool is reflected by a ruffled surface, giving an emerald cast to the water, or autumn leaves may turn it gold. If the water is moving, the ripples, as they face in various directions, reflect the light from different sources, producing patterns of color. But not only water reflects light; leaves and rocks reflect the sky, too-- the upper surfaces of the former, becoming at times in shaded locations as blue as the sky itself, leaving the undersides still a yellow green. The black oxides that form on sandstone in the West, called desert varnish, reflect the sky ^{too} almost ~~too~~ perfectly in shaded alcoves, at which times they shine like windows in the cliff.

Fresh snow is a nearly perfect diffuse reflector, as we all have experienced by the glare from a sunlit winter landscape and by the blueness of shadows illuminated only by the sky. On sunlit snow the blue from the sky is erased by the intensity of the direct sunlight. Some physiologists insist that snow shadows appear blue owing to a mechanism of visual perception by which one sees the complementary color following stimulation by a strong colored light. Since sunlight is slightly yellow, shadows on snow would by this mechanism appear blue by contrast. No doubt this does happen, but it is also a fact that shadows on snow are illuminated by blue sky light and should appear blue as do all shaded areas in summer landscapes as well on bright days. On overcast days snow may appear slightly bluish but is always perceived as neutral white. The blueness of ice and

the interior of clean snow banks, described by Thoreau, is an example of the same phenomenon of differential scattering that makes the sky blue.

All these effects can be recorded on color film and can be enhanced or diminished in the print as the photographer chooses. To those who are not used to observing them they often seem, on reproduction, unreal or false; I have been criticized for the distorted and artificial colors in my photographs. Some people claim that they have never seen anything like them, although they have been to the same places, and therefore they maintain that what I have done is to falsify nature, and they reject my interpretation. For them the photograph is obviously a failure, since it is unconvincing and displeasing. However, the colors in my photographs are always present in the scene itself, although I sometimes emphasize or ^{reduce} ~~depress~~ them in the printing process. To do this is no more than to do what the black and white photographer does with neutral tonal values during the steps of negative development and printing.

I recall an incident when a painter friend saw my exhibition of Glen Canyon photographs and asked me how I could justify representing rocks in those gaudy colors. "What color are rocks?" I asked. "Rock color," he said. Though he lived in the Southwest, he was a New Englander and was unable to free himself from his early-life gray-stones impressions--the "color of antiquity," as Thoreau described the lichened rocks of Concord. He could not contemplate the Utah sandstones of more recent antiquity being different in color from the ancient

granites of Massachusetts. Thoreau, I am sure, would have been more open minded.

When I began to make color prints it became apparent that almost infinite possibilities, contrary to the assertions of the disparagers of color, were available for interpretation and individual expression. I started printing my own color work in 1940
~~1944~~ in Chicago.

The total picture is in the end what counts. All the parts should combine to produce an integrated whole with greatest economy and least irrelevance. The more junk the viewer has to dig through to get the message, the less the photograph will appeal to him and the less conviction it will carry. But nevertheless, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, I believe that intricacy of detail and complexity of subject are not contradictions to harmony nor to an inherent simplicity of the whole. You ~~will probably notice that~~ ^A large percentage of the subjects I photograph are complex but that the many parts and interrelationships within these photographs add up to a simple concept. That one cannot lay down elementary rules, and that when one does he is almost certainly caught in a contradiction, is a measure of the creative potential of an art medium. In the end the evaluation of any medium of expression eventually comes back to a judgment of the work of the individual artist who uses it, and not of the intrinsic nature of the process.