

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

December 18, 2006

## Meerkats & Snowflakes & Trappist Photographers

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [snow](#), [the sentence](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:59 pm

According to [yesterday's New York Times](#), penguins are passé. With two high-budget documentaries in the works, Meerkats are going to be the anthropomorphized stars of 2007.

This can't be good news for Richard Gere. Since 2003, Gere has been trying to produce "[Emperor Zehnder](#)," a biographical portrayal of Bruno Penguin Zehnder (previously discussed on this blog [here](#)).

I think Gere should drop the penguins. That ship has sailed. If he wants to portray a monomaniacal photographer, might I suggest Snowflake Bentley.



Wilson A. Bentley

In 1885, when he was twenty years old, Wilson A. Bentley was the first person to photograph a snowflake. For the next 46 years, Bentley devoted himself to the snowflake. "Under the microscope, I found that snowflakes were miracles of beauty," he wrote, "and it seemed a shame that this beauty should not be seen and appreciated by others." Bentley shared this appreciation by producing over 5000 photographs of snowflakes.

But as with many passionate people, Bentley was considered an eccentric. In a profile on Bentley ([The American Magazine, 1925](#)), Bentley talks about the way he was viewed by his neighbors in Jericho, Vermont:

I guess they've always believed that I was crazy, or a fool, or both. Years ago, I thought they might feel different if they understood what I was doing. I thought they might be glad to understand. So I announced that

I would give a talk in the village and show lantern slides of my pictures. They are beautiful, you know, marvelously beautiful on screen. But when the night came for my lecture, just six people were there to hear me...I think they found my pictures beautiful. I doubt, though, they have changed their opinion of me. They still think I'm a little cracked. I've just had to accept that opinion and try not to care. It doesn't hurt me—very much.

Bentley's passion paid off. Because of him, every school child is taught that 'no two snowflakes are alike.' While we've come to take it for granted, this really is a remarkable discovery. For Bentley it was a revelation, "Every crystal was a masterpiece of design and no one design was ever repeated."



Collage and self-portrait by Wilson Bentley

But like many revelations, Bentley's discovery was touched by sadness. "When a snowflake melted, that design was forever lost," he wrote, "Just that much beauty was gone, without leaving any record behind." While he took great pleasure in capturing a snowflake on film, he truly despaired at all of the ones that got away:

We had one storm last winter which brought me perhaps the most interesting snow crystal I have ever seen: a wonderful little splinter of ice, incredibly fragile. That was a tragedy! In spite of my carefulness, the crystal was broken in transferring it to the slide. It makes me almost cry, even now.

This is the sadness of photography. There is something futile, almost pathetic, about the photographic quest to possess beauty.

I've always found it interesting that so many people try to link [Zen and photography](#). Photography is anti-Zen. Photography is an attempt to stop time and possess the world. Zen is an attempt to live in the moment and relinquish the desire to possess. The two seem completely incompatible.

I recently discussed this with Brother Paul, a Trappist monk at the [Abbey of Gethsemane](#) in Kentucky. Brother Paul is an avid photographer. His teacher, the legendary Thomas Merton, was also a photographer.



Thomas Merton

Brother Paul helped remind me that the great thing about Merton is his acceptance of paradox. He knew his life as a prolific writer was at odds with being a monk. "An author in a Trappist monastery is like a duck in a chicken coop," Merton mourned, "and he would give anything in the world to be a chicken instead of a duck."

Merton could have been a 'chicken.' He could have given himself over entirely to the life of the monastery. He could have lived in the moment. But that would require putting aside the typewriter and the camera. Instead, Merton accepted the joy and despair of paradox. In the preface to a collection of his essays he wrote:

I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologizing for the fact, even to myself. And perhaps this preface is an indication that I have not yet completely learned. No matter. It is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and is still a source of insecurity, that I have come to find the greatest security. I have become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me; if only because someone so complicated and so prone to confusion and self defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy.

Instead of Zen Photography, I suggest the pursuit of Paradox Photography. To make meaningful work there seems to be an inevitable encounter with success and failure, joy and despair.

This doesn't necessarily mean epic drama. To be successful one needn't die in a blizzard (like Penguin Zehnder) or from pneumonia after walking home in a blizzard (like Snowflake Bentley). One needn't cut off an ear. But I don't think successful art can be made without encountering the joy and despair of paradox.

Speaking of joy and despair, while writing this post I started humming the title (*Meerkats & Snowflakes & Trappist Photographers*) to the tune of *My Favorite Things*:

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes  
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes  
Silver white winters that melt into springs  
These are a few of my favorite things

But even in a corny song like this, we can't be satisfied with pure appreciation. Appreciation is always rooted in sadness. The song ends:

When the dog bites  
When the bee stings  
When I'm feeling sad  
I simply remember my favorite things  
And then I don't feel so bad

---

Snowflake Bentley's work will be exhibited until December 22nd at [Davis & Landale](#) in New York.

For more information on Bentley, go [here](#) or [here](#).

There is an exhibition of Thomas Merton's photos, [A Hidden Wholeness: The Zen Photography of Thomas Merton](#), at Loyola University until January 15, 2007

See a terrific portrait of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard [here](#)

## 24 Comments

1. my daughter is crazy for meerkats. Love the snow flake story I just wish we had some of the white stuff on the ground down here in the south (chicago)

*Comment by [doug mcgoldrick](#) — December 18, 2006 @ [11:14 pm](#)*

2. My junior H.S. science teacher felt otherwise, and spent some time debunking the statement that “no two snowflakes are alike” – he’s even devoted part of his website to it: <http://learn-science.20m.com/tmyths.htm#myth1>

The rationale is that it’s either (a) unprovable (nobody can ever see every snowflake to prove that no two are alike); or (b) nonsensical (when you get down to the molecular level, you could say no two golf balls are alike).

In any case, I like Bentley’s passion to document the unprovably infinite variations of pattern. He strikes me as a progenitor of the Bechers.

*Comment by Michael H. — December 19, 2006 @ [5:04 am](#)*

3. Alec, I’m seeing a karaoke night in our future...  
ps. I

*Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [8:50 am](#)*

4. \*heart\* meerkat manor

*Comment by [Brian Ulrich](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [8:57 am](#)*

5. This is a very intriguing set of ideas to set next to each other, like pretty beads on a string. I’m in awe — how do you find the time?

Without getting too theological, I don’t think there’s too much inherent paradox/contradiction between photography and “Zen” (at least, as vaguely understood in the West) — what, after all, is a Zen haiku or ink drawing, if not a captured moment? I think the issues arise when you start trying to capture or express “essences” by depicting surfaces (an unspoken assumption of much art photography). I think many (most?) people have abandoned the desire and pursuit of “essences” as a dead end. But it’s also perfectly possible to make art precisely as a way of \*not\* holding on to something.

At worst, many “zen” photographers are prone to what someone once memorably called “heavy breathing” in their work — those anthologies like “Octave of Prayer” which Minor White did for Aperture in the 70s seem pretty creepy, now. But yes, let’s all pursue and encourage Paradox and Obsession (and set Coltrane loose on “Favourite Things”!)

*Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [9:00 am](#)*

6. I’ve read a lot of Merton and what’s interesting is that his philosophy (the negation of self is a broader term but “zen” is shorter) is very applicable to certain modes of photography.

I think it is about the process and not about style. I know most people think of “zen photography” as being a style, like Bill Schwab or Michael Kenna or whatever. To me, it is about removing oneself and one’s preconceptions from the process. We have to kill off our false selves to find our true selves.

Merton’s best line, which relates to these false selves: “I am my own worst mistake.”

*Comment by [Lenny](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [9:36 am](#)*

7. Brian, the only way you are going to get me to do Karaoke is if you take me to some weird private club in a skyscraper in Tokyo with [Scarlett Johansson](#)

*Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [9:54 am](#)*

8. Mike C., that's a very interesting way to reconcile those two ideas. My intuition is more in line with Alec's, in this sense: Taking photographs with the intent of *capturing* something (usually a certain person or place, at a certain moment) is always for me accompanied by an existential anxiety. If I don't manage to "get it", then it's gone, and can't be called back. The anxiety is the need to "staunch the continuous hemorrhage of the present into the past".

With a camera in hand, stalking around the photographic subject, I'm trying to attain a type of self-awareness – a phenomenological self-awareness, let's say – that will help me press the button at the right moment from the right spot (with all the right settings!). But this self-awareness does not amount to the dissolution of the anxiety; to the contrary, it's the presence of anxiety that heightens the moment. It just doesn't guarantee results.

*Comment by [Nicholas Knight](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [10:20 am](#)*

9. Alec Consider it done. See you in the future singing Roxy Music. My publicist will contact your publicist.

*Comment by [Zaphod Ulrich](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [10:39 am](#)*

10. Very nice post. Didn't realize Merton was a photographer– my admiration for him increases....

*Comment by [Tom Morrissey](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [11:55 am](#)*

11. The song's not corny in the Coltrane version, btw.

*Comment by [Tom Morrissey](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [11:57 am](#)*

12. Thanks, Nicholas. On anxiety, I subscribe to the advice of the doctor in the old joke (Patient: Doctor, it hurts when I do \*this\*. Doctor: Then stop doing that!), but I agree that getting "in the Zone" can be 80% of photography (though this may only apply to those living monastically or with the benefit of making a living by other means); as Lenny says, it's about process. However, it's the difference between fishing for sport, and fishing for food. If my kids went hungry if I didn't Get the Shot, every day, I'd get more than anxious and resort to some pretty un-Zenlike strategies...

When it comes to the end product of the process, it's surely always a case of "don't trust the teller, trust the tale". Some people can talk up very ordinary work very well. But a photo of a barn door is a photo of a barn door, even if the photographer experienced satori at f8 at the time – the experience is simply not embedded in the artefact, though it may sometimes invite us to meet the artist halfway (oh dear, I'm talking like Wordsworth, now, and there are people talking karaoke over in the other corner of this Smoky Loft!)

*Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [12:23 pm](#)*

13. Well, Mike, I suppose that one might lose the false selves while immersed in an epic version of "Like a Virgin"!

To clarify my usage of "anxiety": I don't really intend this term to have negative connotations. It is the desire to "be there" while working (working creatively in a broad sense, too – since I have a studio life beyond photography) and yet being constantly aware of the roadblocks, both internal and external. I'm imagining traveling to a site to shoot for a day, and prowling all over, with the feeling I'm perceiving that specific something that I want to grab in the image. But then getting home, reviewing the shoot, and thinking "why didn't I stand halfway between shot 1 and shot 2?"



From the view of feeding the children, every day (do they *have* to eat every day?), one can certainly depend on the old stand-by techniques to get shots that work. (No worry for me: no kids, and no stand-by skills!) But in the context of, uh, spiritual awareness, the stand-by stuff is just another impediment to being there, I'd wager.

As for embedding the experience in the artifact, I think I need to quit my job before digging in to that...

Comment by [Nicholas Knight](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [12:52 pm](#)

14. Scientific photographer Ted Kinsman did a snowflake project in 2004-2005:

[http://www.sciencephotography.com/cgi-bin/emAlbum.cgi?cmd=show\\_thumbs&path=snowflakes\\_03\\_04](http://www.sciencephotography.com/cgi-bin/emAlbum.cgi?cmd=show_thumbs&path=snowflakes_03_04)

Cheers,

Joe

Comment by [Joe Reifer](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [2:47 pm](#)

15. "But in the context of, uh, spiritual awareness, the stand-by stuff is just another impediment to being there, I'd wager." Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps it depends whether the goal is spiritual awareness or great photographs! Whichever, I sincerely doubt the two are ever linked in any causal way. (Personally, given the choice by the Devil at the crossroads at midnight, I'd probably go for the great photographs ...)

Monks these days study hard in order to turn  
A fine phrase and win fame as talented poets.  
At Crazy Cloud's hut there is no such talent,  
but he serves up the taste of truth  
As he boils rice in a wobbly old cauldron.  
(Ikkyu, 15th c.)

For sure, routine work never made anyone famous.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [3:21 pm](#)

16. Yummy verse, Mike.

I tend not to spend much time reflecting on 'spiritual awareness' (was that even what Alec's post was about? Not sure now). I guess that's because I presume achieving it along the avenue of artistic production seems almost certainly futile. But now presented with the Devil, and the pale moonlight, I think I'd choose it. I mean, who cares about a great photograph?

My dovetailing assumption here is that the impulse to make art – regardless of its ostensive subject – is at some level a response to the *horror vacui* that opens up when an individual is confronted with...well, I'm afraid to finish that sentence I suppose, but anyway it's something deep down that drives people towards their obsessions (artistic and otherwise). So, if (If!) 'spiritual awareness' were some kind of cure, I'd be tempted to imbibe it. That's a pretty big "if", because as it stands, I love being in the studio and making work! Perhaps this is at the root of Merton's (and Soth's) paradox?

Comment by [Nicholas Knight](#) — December 19, 2006 @ [3:49 pm](#)

17. "Photography is anti-Zen. Photography is an attempt to stop time and possess the world. Zen is an attempt to live in the moment and relinquish the desire to possess."

i have a few issues with alec's statement. first, i question his understanding of zen, where any intellectual grasp is just 'understanding.' as zen masters often say, 'understanding can not help you.' zen has no particular point of view, so the idea that photography is 'anti-zen' doesn't really hold up. i

also challenge the idea that 'photography is an attempt to stop time and possess the world.' some photography is, some isn't.

as one person here wrote, zen's connection with photography can come from it's action, it's process or practice. as the great Suzuki Roshi used to say, even going to the bathroom is a chance to get enlightenment. so, as a means to enlightenment photography is as viable an activity as any. the resulting picture needn't be about anything in particular, but as many including john szarkowski have noted, photographs are always, like the zen practitioner, in the present.

*Comment by john kerren — December 19, 2006 @ [5:48 pm](#)*

18. "Zen has no particular point of view, so the idea that photography is 'anti-zen' doesn't really hold up"

I have just one issue with this statement. Photography HAS a POINT-OF-VIEW.

*Comment by Lee — December 19, 2006 @ [6:46 pm](#)*

19. lee-i also think that zen has a point of view of no point of view. i think there is photography that also has the point of view of 'no point of view.'

*Comment by john kerren — December 19, 2006 @ [11:53 pm](#)*

20. All this reminded me of Frederick Sommers' views on chance:

"I have five pebbles, not too different in size and weight, yet a randomness about them. If I drop them on the carpet they will scatter. Now we could run an experiment and we would find that we cannot put these pebbles in shapes that would be as elegant and as nicely related and with as great a variety as every time they fall. It is better than anything we could do. I have great respect for the way I find things. Every time something falls I look. I cannot believe the relationships. The intricacy. You hear a noise and you say 'What is that?' Respect for the affirmation of the unexpected."

And, trying to dig out that quote, I found this:

so what did the zen  
monk say to the  
hotdog vendor make me  
one with everything

*Comment by [Mike C.](#) — December 20, 2006 @ [5:03 am](#)*

21. If you're only making a photo when you make the photo, then it could not be more perfect zen practice. If you're not only making a photo, you're wasting your time. (paraphrased from my former priest at the kansas zen center, when we were discussing photography as zen practice)

So the guy takes the hot dog and hands the vendor a \$20 bill.

The vendor says thank you.

"Hey, I gave you a \$20 and the hotdog was \$3. Where's my change?"

The hotdog vendor says, "Change must come from within."

And Alec, your snow dance seems to be working.

*Comment by [Clint](#) — December 20, 2006 @ [11:24 am](#)*

22. another brilliant thread...! I have had a passing passion for Snowflake Bentley (never saw that great collage though), as well as Merton and the notion of Buddhism and the practice of photography, now I'll have to look into Meerkats – or, more likely, return to the former two topics. btw, I've always doubted that there are no two identical snowflakes... but I suppose if anyone could prove it it would have been Snowflake Bentley, and could that lead to the thought that there are no two identical photographs (not



photographic prints, or brackets, of course) and would it take a "crazy person" or a "fool" to fully appreciate that fact?

*Comment by [Mark S](#) — December 20, 2006 @ [1:03 pm](#)*

23. Man holding toy plane  
A picture of Elvis  
Love letters, sweethearts and  
ennui in motels  
A light bulb, an angel  
A green hanging door  
These are a few of my favorite Soths

*Comment by [guybatey](#) — December 20, 2006 @ [3:59 pm](#)*

24. I love this entry. Meerkats and mindfulness – who could ask for more? For the record, I'm still upset over the saga of missing meerkat, Shakespeare.

*Comment by [bob](#) — January 4, 2007 @ [10:16 am](#)*