

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 3, 2007

Bernard Plossu & Tom Sandberg

Filed under: artists — alecsothblog @ 12:00 am

BERNARD PLOSSU



Shane, New Mexico, 1983 by Bernard Plossu

Most of my photographic education has come through American publications. It is only within the last few years that I've begun to dip into the vast sea of European photography. (I'm saving Japan for my retirement).

Upon the recommendation of Mr. Whiskets, I recently purchased a copy of *Conversations with Contemporary Photographers*. One of those conversations is with Bernard Plossu. Plossu spent years living in Taos and seems to have served as a critical link between American and European photography in the 70's and 80's. Even though he has published numerous books, his pictures have never crossed my eyes until now:



Mexico, 1966 by Bernard Plossu



Le Mauritanien endormi, 1976 by Bernard Plossu

Plossu was born in 1945 in South Vietnam. At thirteen he traveled with a Brownie across the Sahara with his father. Ever since, he has been fascinated with deserts. But Plossu is equally drawn to the energy of the city. In the *Conversations* interview with Juan Manuel Bonet, he talks about this contrast and how it affects his photography:

Bernard Plossu: To take photographs one has to be like a monk, to achieve a maximum degree of concentration, like with meditation, and at the same time possess a delirious disposition. This is why I say that photographing is a meeting place for that sort of delirium and absolute peace. Photography is made up of those two moments. They combine to create dynamite.

JMB: Although there are works of yours in which I can see that combination there are others where it is the calm that predominates. Maybe it is with your urban landscapes where a dose of chaos is more noticeable. It's in the city where the delirium counts more than the calm for you, no?

Bernard Plossu: Absolutely. There is no peace. But I do believe that the two experiences complement each other, the experience of nature and those of the city.



Villa Noailles, 1997 by Bernard Plossu



Mexique, route d'Acapulco, 1965 by Bernard Plossu

See more of Bernard Plossu's work [here](#) and [here](#)

TOM SANDBERG



Untitled, 2004 by Tom Sandberg

The work of Bernard Plossu reminds me a bit of Tom Sandberg. Sandberg (b. 1953) lives and works in Oslo, Norway. I learned of his work earlier this year at an exhibition at PS1.



Untitled, 2003 by Tom Sandberg

Sandberg has been working for thirty years in large-format, black and white. His subjects include an eclectic mix of aerial views, close-up portraits, nudes and still life. But the work is all unified by a quality of muted elegance. He talks about this in an interview with *The Morning News*.

TMN: Very little, if not none, of the material world shows up in your work. How do you find your way to these pictures? Surely you turn on the television now and again.

Tom Sandberg: A Norwegian art historian who came by my house shockingly remarked that I was looking at the television and listening to rock music at the same time. Then suddenly everything turns still. Movement plays an important role in the way I live and work.

TMN: What are you working on now?

Tom Sandberg: At the moment I am very into people just hanging around, doing nothing, or standing there looking—these in-betweens that define the human experience. I have always been interested in what goes on in the sky above our heads, and lately have worked a lot with the stars. Flying often, I am excited about the radiations from the big cities and the ocean meeting outside my window. It makes me both humble and hungry.



Untitled, 2002 by Tom Sandberg



Untitled, by Tom Sandberg

See more of Tom Sandberg's pictures [here](#) and [here](#)

24 Comments

1. [...] alec soth – blog » Blog Archive » Bernard Plossu & Tom Sandberg [...]

Pingback by Gramarye » Blog Archive » alec soth on Bernard Plossu & Tom Sandberg — July 3, 2007 @ 1:54 am

2. Last year I purchased the book
Bernard Plossu : Rétrospective 1963-2006
<http://www.amazon.fr/Bernard-Plossu-R%C3%A9trospective-Gilles-Mora/dp/2848930373>
I highly recommend it.
Some people compare his work with Robert Frank's.

Comment by Jay Watkins — July 3, 2007 @ 2:26 am

3. beautiful little book of unedited work by bernard plossu:

“froget me not”

by tf editores

<http://www.tfeditores.com/index.cfm>

Comment by adrian tyler — July 3, 2007 @ 7:26 am

4. Hi,
I also saw the Tom Sandberg show at PS1. It was a great installation.
“Muted elegance” is the exactly perfect descripton for his works.
There will be a big show on Contemporary Japanese Photography and Video at the ICP in 2008, which I am been involoved as a researcher.

Comment by MIka Kobayashi — July 3, 2007 @ 8:08 am

5. Thanks for these. Some amazing work I've never come across.

Comment by Brian Ulrich — July 3, 2007 @ 8:48 am

6. Plossu has some connections to a magazine out of Canada named Hobo. I picked one up a year or two ago as I was traveling and that is where I first saw his work. The magazine is hit or miss but generally includes some good photography.

Comment by grant ernhart — July 3, 2007 @ 10:53 am

7. Years ago I saw Bernard Plossu's images in Photo Nouvelle magazine. It was one of the major inspirations for me at the time. It is one of those photographers, when one looks at his work one thinks 'this is so simple I can do this' but it can't be done. And that is always a sign of greatness. Thanks for highlighting his work.
BTW, Photo Nouvelle (published in France but available here in Quebec, don't know about Minnesota) is a great resource for European photography, I recommend subscribing...
All the Best,

Comment by Velibor Bozovic — July 3, 2007 @ 11:40 am

8. “(I'm saving Japan for my retirement).”

i foresee great things happening in your retirement!

Comment by Tomé Duarte — July 3, 2007 @ 12:13 pm

9. I too saw the Tom Sandberg show at PS1. I thought the images were quite interesting from a technical standpoint – large, immaculate, silver prints. And really, with very few exceptions, there wasn't any black in them. Every tone up to but not including black. Quite beautiful with a quiet elegance – decorative would be another term to use, if I can use that term without being derogatory.

But the airplane image bothered me. Perhaps I am being totally ignorant or naive here, but there is no way an airliner of that size would fly that close to the ground without landing gear out, on landing, take-off or touch-and-go. Even a small plane is difficult to control that close to the ground. So that made me wonder about manipulation of the images, even though the verbiage makes much ado about Sandberg's use of "straight photography". I think I found other images in the show where the possibility of manipulation presented itself subtly, which made me continue to think.

Not that I want or believe in total honesty in art, but I am not so happy with cheap slyness. If not manipulated, well then that airplane photograph is exceptionally strange. If manipulated, then big deal, say it as so. The photograph still has merits that are substantially supportive. But with the rhetoric of "straight photography" alongside evidence of seemingly "curvy" technique, I am left with the feeling that there is some smugly maintained ambiguity going on I think cheapens the image a bit. At least for me.

Of course, in my reading, I may have missed clarification of his technique. And admittedly, working within a tradition of "straight photography" may not mean that one is actually making straight photographs. As I said, I could just be naive here.

Comment by J Ake — July 4, 2007 @ 4:52 pm

10. J,

In Bob Nickas' essay that accompanied the show catalog he writes that the wheels on the plane were indeed digitally removed. I have to admit I was initially a little disappointed to read this, but I quickly got over it and love the photo now just as much as before. Nickas also states that this is one of two instances where Sandberg has used digital manipulation.

Comment by N — July 4, 2007 @ 7:10 pm

11. Great points on Sandberg's plane picture. I keep going back and forth on this issue. But part of me does agree with Elliott Erwitt:

Elliott Erwitt by Alec Soth

Comment by Alec Soth — July 4, 2007 @ 7:24 pm

12. Last week J ake and I went to see the show First Contact: A Photographer's Sketchbook at Silverstein (<http://www.silversteinphotography.com/artist.php?id=148>). To our surprise, we "discovered" that the famous photograph of Nikita Khrushchev visiting Lincoln Memorial by Magnum photographer Burt Glinn (http://www.magnumphotos.com/Archive/C.aspx?VP=Mod_ViewBox.ViewBoxZoom_VPage&VBID=2K1HZOQIGY52T&IT=ImageZoom01&PN=10&STM=T&DTTM=Image&SP=Album&IID=2S5RYDZ2DCGX&SAKL=T&SGBT=T&DT=Image) was manipulated (non-digitally, of course).

Comment by S. LIU — July 4, 2007 @ 8:41 pm

13. S.Liu,
Can you please explain in what sense it was manipulated?

Comment by Jay Watkins — July 5, 2007 @ 5:21 am

14. i believe the t-shirt but it would be interesting to know what Mr. Erwitt considers "digital manipulation". i have to believe with all the big color prints that are being produced for galleries these days that there is quite a bit of "adjusting" going on with the digital files used to produce them. is that "digital manipulation"?

Comment by j zorn — July 5, 2007 @ 10:36 am

15. N – thanks for the clarification. I wondered if I had missed something and my worries were not for naught. Now I have to decide how I feel about that.

I think S. Liu was referring to the opportunity to see contact sheet & then final images at Silverstein Gallery. In the original image of Khrushchev on the contact sheet, a post from the chain surrounding Lincoln's sculpture appeared to stick out of Khrushchev's right ear, and on the left edge of the photo, several figures, perhaps press or assistants, partially entered the frame. In the final version, the interfering pole had been removed and the chain's arc was reconstructed to appear as if the pole's location was instead completely obscured by Khrushchev's head, and the other figures had been removed completely from the frame, leaving Krushchev as a solitary figure. Quite a bit of work. I assume it was done by photo retouching – i.e. a print was made, retouched, and then rephotographed & printed again. Analog in other words. And I don't think this was uncommon practice.

Comment by J Ake — July 5, 2007 @ 1:18 pm

16. Here is a tiny url of the final image, just in case the one in SLiu's post gets chopped.

<http://www.tiny.cc/6RN53>

Comment by J Ake — July 5, 2007 @ 1:22 pm

17. gorgeous
thank you

Comment by vita — July 5, 2007 @ 2:34 pm

18. If you are travelling in Europe this summer: there is a large Plossu exhibition at the Musee de la Photographie in Charleroi, Belgium (<http://www.museephoto.be/>). About 400 pictures from his American and Mexican series made in the 70' and 80's are on show.

Charleroi is about an hour's drive south of Brussels and the museum – based in a former abbey – is well worth the visit.

Comment by Jan V — July 6, 2007 @ 9:09 am

19. [...] In a way it wasn't a surprise to find Alec Soth, a photographer whose work I greatly admire, and a guy who obviously knows his photography and writes about it well, hadn't heard of Bernard Plossu. After all, Soth is an American. [...]

Pingback by >Re: PHOTO » Blog Archive » Plossu and Sandberg — July 6, 2007 @ 12:35 pm

20. To Peter Marshall, who apparently authored the quote above. There was a time in the early 1980s when Bernard Plossu was as well known in the US as he was in France, if not more so. He lived in New Mexico then. I am an American and wrote the introduction to one of his many books. It was published over 25 years ago. I can't help but be defensive and tell you that there are many more Americans who are aware of non-US photography than it appears from where you are.

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 10, 2007 @ 4:08 pm

21. It is excellent that you list Plossu and Sandberg after previously mentioning Judy Lynn in a past post. After hearing about Plossu I looked up and borrowed Forget Me Not which for some reason led me to check out Robert Adams A Portrait in Landscapes. Thank you for the trigger.

Comment by lucas — July 13, 2007 @ 12:13 am

22. the eye that enjoys this might also enjoy the work of joan colom, if it already hasn't.

Comment by stacy — July 13, 2007 @ 6:06 pm

23. I was just forwarded this post and have quite enjoyed reading through it. Alec, thank you for posting. I had not heard of Tom Sandberg before, however I am quite curious to look into his work a little more. Also, to Jay Watkins – there was a wonderful showing of the Retrospective work at Eaton Fine Art in West Palm Beach, Florida. I think that the gallery's website may still have some highlights / references to it.

Comment by Shane Plossu — July 20, 2007 @ 5:02 pm

24. i have just read through the Bob Nickas essay from the Sandberg 1989-2006 book as it came up in a conversation, and feel I should point out that there is actually no mention of *digital* alteration specifically. Maybe it was, but all that is said in the essay about that in regard to that plane photo is "This is one of only two instances in which Sandberg had altered a picture."

Comment by robert phillips — August 26, 2007 @ 11:31 am