

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

February 19, 2007

William T. Vollmann

Filed under: [artists, quotes](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:11 am

My [recent quiz](#) on celebrity photographers failed to mention William T. Vollmann. Vollman doesn't have a website or, for that matter, use the internet or email. Not surprisingly, he isn't a big fan of digital photography. In a recent interview in [BookForum](#), he says:

I dislike digital photography because there is no guarantee of permanence as of yet. A compact disc or DVD has a very limited life. When I was photographing the street prostitutes in Sacramento, I used my 8×10 camera and made some platinum prints that should last hundreds of years. It makes me happy to think that these poor prostitutes, whom no one ever gave a damn about, whom people spat on and did terrible things to, will have a certain amount of immortality."

Vollmann has traveled the world (and continues to spend time as a train hobo), written around sixty books (including a seven-volume, 3300 page treatise on violence) has a wife and child and still has time to mix in some painting and alternative process photography. He doesn't pursue any of it lightly. One example [here](#):

Q: As part of the research for The Royal Family, you smoked crack, by your own admission, about a hundred times. Is something like that simply a matter of wanting to be able to write from a more experiential perspective, rather than simply observational?

Vollmann: That's exactly what it is. Otherwise, you really don't know what you're doing. If you want to write about somebody who's a crackhead, you better understand firsthand the effect that crack has or it's really going to be hard to do it right. That's the easiest, simplest, best way. It's like if you're doing printing-out process photography—the best thing you can do is expose your negative in the sun. If you want to, you can have an exposure lamp, and it can be calibrated, but it won't be as strong as the sun, or as even. You won't give as much UV radiation. Why not just stick with what's already there for you, instead of having to talk to a hundred people about how crack feels? Just do it once and you'll know.

I've hunted around the web and can't seem to find any of his photographs (can anyone help?). The only thing I found were some examples of [his artwork](#):



21 Comments

1. Alec,

I have read several Vollmann books, which typically leave me feeling the residue of what he has written. The Royal Family stayed with me for such a long time. I had no idea he was a photographer. I can't imagine what this work looks like. If you find anything more on his images I would love to know.

DRM

Comment by [Daniel Milnor](#) — February 19, 2007 @ [1:28 pm](#)

2. Can't help on his own photos, but apropos of previous posts: the author photo on the jacket of my 1st edition of "You Bright and Risen Angels" (his first novel) is a rather striking portrait of a young W.T.Vollmann placing an automatic pistol in his own mouth. Like the bulk of his writing, the image maintains an odd sincerity despite being self-absorbed hyperbole.

Comment by JCF — February 19, 2007 @ [3:42 pm](#)

3. Here's a link that I came across a while ago: http://esposito.typepad.com/TQC_6/Vollmann_Art.html

Comment by [Russell Kaye](#) — February 20, 2007 @ [7:36 am](#)

4. If Vollman finds Platinum printing from 8+10 negs appropriate for his vision, what the heck does that have to do with the digital realm?
When he says he dislikes digital photography I'm sure he means the digital process, since there are many stunning examples of digital Photography and Cinematography. There are ways of archiving digital images with the longevity of film, but first: Vollman compares digital archiving with the stability of Platinum printing. I fail to see a direct relationship there. Is he suggesting that there are no ways to produce an archival print from a digital file? A carbon pigment on an archival matrix is worthy of any image. Should artists choose their media based solely upon archival qualities, rather than expressive and interpretive ones? Marble over soapstone, oils over watercolor, etc.?
Digital imagery and "traditional" methods can, and should coexist. After twenty odd years of working with traditional darkroom methods, what I find particularly seductive about the digital realm is that it offers an unlimited potential for interpreting subject matter- whether I wish to make a Platinum print from an edited digital intermediate or a Giclee print. Digital photography is simply an extension of the artistic process and need not be seen as a threat to one's personal aspirations. Archival phobia? Output digitally mastered and edited files to film separations, and save the files in the solid state realm.

"... these poor prostitutes... will have a certain amount of immortality". Huh?

And, unless you ARE a "crackhead" then it's all "simply observation".
Nothing wrong with observation, it worked for the greatest writers.

Comment by [Bill Anderson](#) — February 20, 2007 @ [2:43 pm](#)

5. William T. Vollmann is a real character. Back in May 1994 he was a passenger in a car with a friend and a translator when they ran over a landmine just outside of Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Vollman survived but his two companions, one an American, were killed. I was in the same area that day and when word went out on the BBC that an American journalist had been killed many of my colleagues and family thought that it was I who had bought it. A couple of months after, Vollmann wrote about what happened for SPIN magazine, and I wrote to him. We corresponded by mail for a while about the state of affairs in the world, and about his writing and travels. He is a unique fellow, and absolutely fearless.

Comment by [Roger Richards](#) — February 20, 2007 @ [5:10 pm](#)

6. there are some photos taken by vollman in the front and back of his book "The Atlas", which is a damn good book by the way. The reproductions aren't that great, but they give a general idea of some of his photographic work.

i havent seen anything outside of that. i know that he sometimes collaborates with photographer ken miller (i think miller's pics are in vollman's book "whores for gloria"). but i could be wrong about that; i lost that book.

Comment by [ryan a](#) — February 21, 2007 @ [1:14 am](#)

7. Delicious irony. The prolific author and photographer – the 'immortaliser' – eschews digital process on the grounds of permanence. And yet, no, as such, his photography can't be found on the internet, the largest media resource on the planet. As everyone knows, prostitutes are granted immortality on the internet and dvd, not by some dusty 8×10 silver gelatin prints under the bed.

Perhaps that was your point.

Comment by [rob](#) — February 21, 2007 @ [3:34 am](#)

8. How strange the statement by Vollmann — "I dislike digital photography because there is no guarantee of permanence as of yet." — when, in fact, digital versions of images offer the first true hope of permanence. Measuring image permanence based on metal salts, be they silver or platinum, is only looking at their lasting abilities for a little over 170 years. For most, that length of time equals permanent, but the reality is we have watched most of the images based on that technology literally fade away. "Guarantee" of image permanence depends more on conditions of storage than the materials from which it is crafted. I have little doubt that a silver print I made this past week will be little more than a pile of dust in a thousands years from now (oh, that the "photo" Gods decree that I have an image worthy of of such life and meaningfulness). However, digital, for the first time, offers the prospect of true and guaranteed permanence because it only "x's" and "o's" and not the results of highly complex chemical reactions. If we keep all those "x's" and "o's" properly aligned, we will have the image ten-thousands of years from now.....the "if" in this sentence is a tall order, but at the least, it offers the first true hope of guaranteed permanence.

Comment by [Frank Armstrong](#) — February 21, 2007 @ [11:01 am](#)

9. all this talk of perneance make me feel a little ill. maybe if we paid a little more attention to what is happening now and worrying about our own glorious work, glorious culture then the world may not be such a mess...perhaps we should be making sure we start archiving all the paintings and images of trees so that the future generations may know what they once were...

and i'd agree with other comments in regards to observing rather than experiencing. you don't need to punch someone in the face to know what violence is.

Comment by [pj](#) — February 22, 2007 @ [12:44 am](#)

10. all this talk of perneance makes me feel a little ill. maybe if we paid a little more attention to what is happening now instead of worrying about our own glorious work, glorious culture then the world may not be such a mess...perhaps we should be making sure we start archiving all the paintings and images of trees so that the future generations may know what the earth once was...

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Comment by [pj](#) — February 22, 2007 @ [12:46 am](#)

11. *you don't need to punch someone in the face to know what violence is.*

yeah, but smoking crack can be kind of fun.

i read that book, tried to read that book. i hope you find some of his images sounds interesting.

Comment by [charley](#) — February 22, 2007 @ [1:11 am](#)

12. *i'd a sister who smoked crack who'd probably disagree...*

Comment by [pj](#) — February 22, 2007 @ [5:16 pm](#)

13. *permanence is an idea that never actually happens. why worry about it? very deep, i know.*

this comes from a guy who used to belong to the ansel adams/john sexton school of obsessive archival processing. at one point i said to myself, after hours and hours of washing print after print, "what the #@&% am I going to do with all this shit?" it was then that i realized a little degradation might do me some good. it saves space.

about vollman and smoking crack: hey man, if that's what he wants/needs to do, that's his choice. i'll take his word for it, though, when it comes to knowing what smoking crack is like.

sometimes second hand knowlegde suits me just fine.

Comment by [ryan a](#) — February 23, 2007 @ [12:12 am](#)

14. *artwork reminds me of Philip Guston*

Comment by [alek lindus](#) — February 25, 2007 @ [3:37 am](#)

15. *The 8×10 pictures are not available as of yet since the prostitutes pictured may still be alive. His new book "Poor People" has an extensive selection of his images reproduced in the back. Most if not all of them are from 35mm negatives. He eschews digital capture and digital printing.*

Comment by [Bill](#) — February 26, 2007 @ [1:29 pm](#)

16. *If you want to get a feel for Vollmann's work start with Ken Miller he worked with v on several projects and their work is very similiar*

<http://www.amazon.com/Open-All-Night-Ken-Miller/dp/0879515716>

sorry for the Amazon link, both Miller and Vollmann's work are hard to find on the web.

Comment by [J.M. Giordano](#) — March 1, 2007 @ [3:35 pm](#)

17. *Platinum printing was the archival standard long before digital came along. It also handily beats color negatives, color prints, selenium-toned silver prints, etc. etc. Walker Evans' Polaroid work is already going, and so are Rothko's paintings. So we're to assume they shouldn't have bothered?*

Comment by [Mike H.](#) — March 12, 2007 @ [3:49 am](#)

18. *this is a very interesting thread, and the responses are equally interesting with sense and humour as well. it looks like everyone has a valid opinion about the subject-person. well, i just want to say that i had a good time reading all the responses and while at it, laughing hard, because maybe i can relate to what was being discussed. i do platinum printing as well, and while i do digital imaging in all my commercial works, i can say that both traditional and technological processess serves me well. i guess for me, it is a matter of deciding "when" and "when not to" use digital or traditional.
that's all!!!*

Comment by [allanrazo](#) — March 20, 2007 @ [10:07 am](#)

19. Vollmann want to be remembered.

Comment by [Out to Lunch](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [1:15 pm](#)

20. His newest, "Poor People," has over 100 photographs in the back relating to the content. The unabridged "Rising Up and Rising Down" is also chocked full of his photos.

Comment by [J](#) — April 23, 2007 @ [7:38 pm](#)

21. here's myspacingdotcom site with a few pics of him in his studio for any interested...<http://tinyurl.com/2zkuue>

Comment by [kundryVolare](#) — June 15, 2007 @ [8:04 am](#)