

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 17, 2007

Reflections in the helmet shield

Filed under: aesthetics,photo tech,quotes — alecsothblog @ 10:27 pm

On the cover of this month's Vanity Fair is a typical bland celebrity photograph. The only interesting element in the picture is the reflection in the helmet:



I'm glad I didn't have to take this picture. All of that equipment looks like a drag.

In the current issue of PDN, Joseph Kudelka talks about making pictures. "For me photography is playing," he says, "I go out and I play and I try to discover." Later in the interview he tells this story of showing pictures to John Szarkowski.

My sister lived in Canada. I was on my way to visit my sister because my mother had gotten permission to go there. I brought with me little prints that, when I traveled, I would show. I missed my plane and went over to Elliot Erwitt's place. He said, "You are here, so why not show your pictures to this guy from the Museum of

Modern Art who once published one of your photographs, John Szarkowski?" I went there and said I have some pictures that I was going to show my sister and mother so they could see the places I've been, and he looked through them and John said – this I'll never forget – "I feel I'd like to go out and take pictures again. And I would like to make your show."

In Szarkowski's 1979 book/exhibition, *Mirrors and Windows*, he divides photographic practice into two categories. On the one hand there is romantic or self-expressionistic work (mirrors), on the other there is realist or more purely descriptive work (windows). As an example of romantic work Szarkowski cites Minor White and the early years of his publication *Aperture*. As an example of descriptive work he uses Robert Frank's book *The Americans*.

Looking through *Mirrors and Windows*, I often find myself disagreeing with Szarkowski's classifications. In fact, I've always believed that *The Americans* is as much an act of romantic self-expression as it is a commentary on America. The key is in the last picture of the book. Here Frank shows his own wife and child in an automobile. In giving us this moment of reflection, we see all of the preceding pictures a little differently:



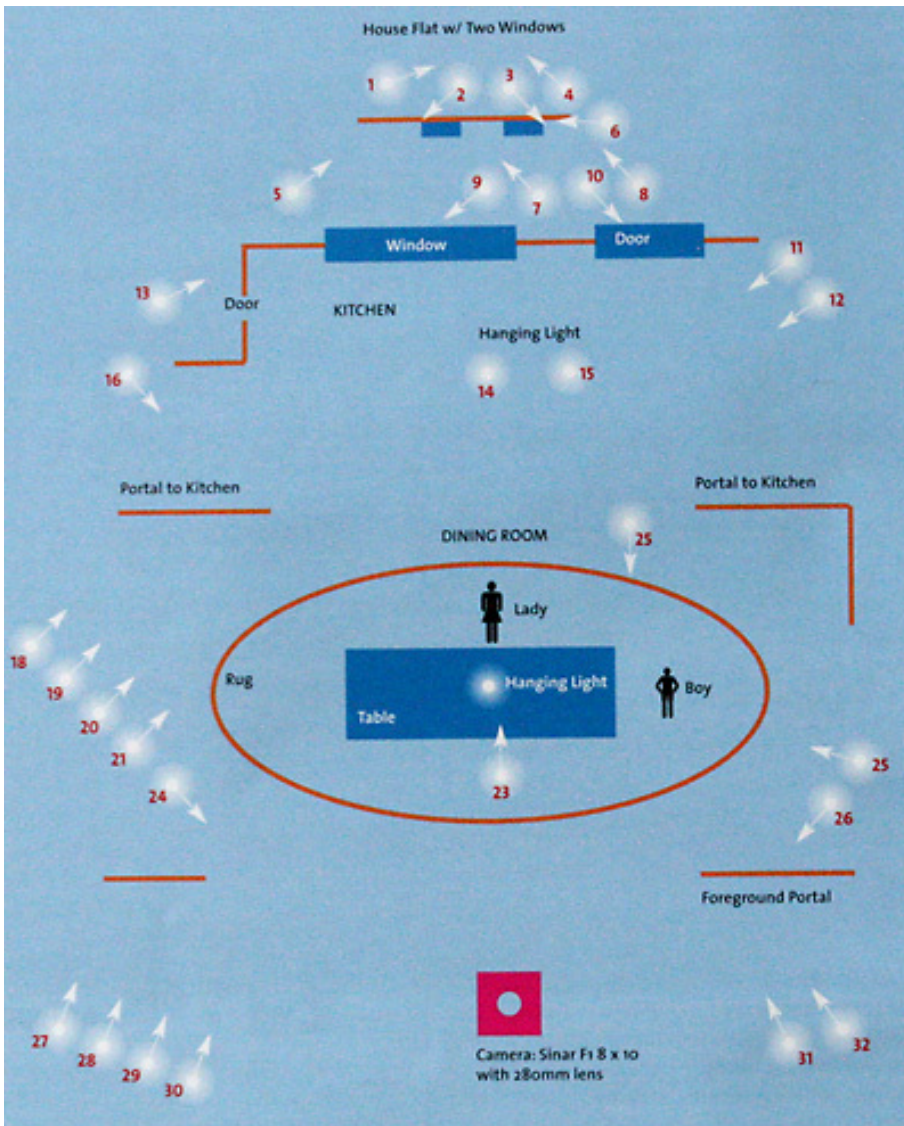
US 90, en route to Del Rio, Texas by Robert Frank

Whether you are Minor White or Robert Frank, almost every photograph starts with an act of pure description – a window. But every now and then you catch a glimpse of the photographer's reflection. The mirror is just another function of the window:



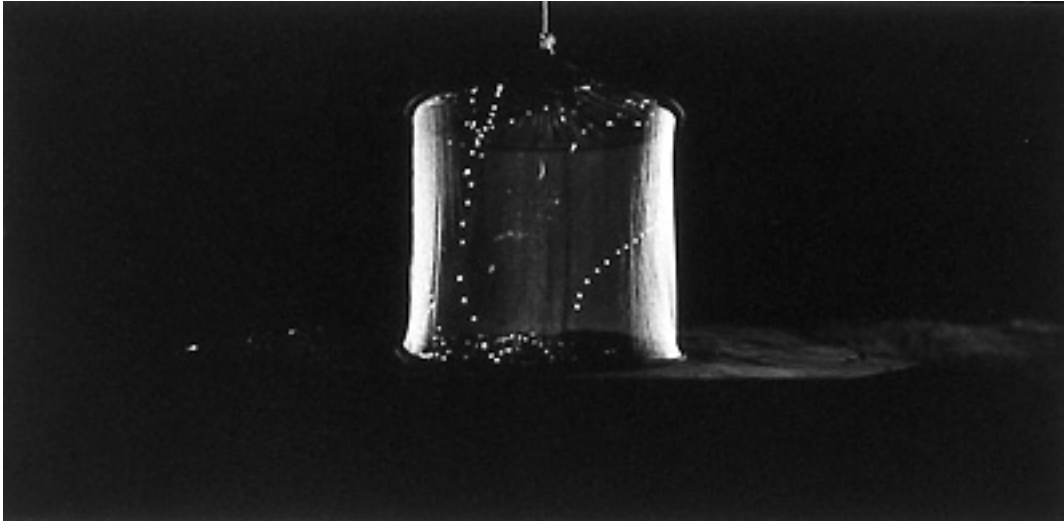
New Orleans, 1968 by Lee Friedlander

Along with the Koudelka interview, the current issue of PDN interviews Gregory Crewdson about his lighting technique. The article includes this diagram of his lighting setup:



Untitled (Sunday Roast), 2005 by Gregory Crewdson

As with the VF cover, this doesn't make me want to run out and take pictures. But this isn't always the case with Crewdson's work. In 1996, after the collapse of his first marriage, Credson left New York and spent a summer in a log cabin photographing fireflies. The process looks like a lot of fun:



Untitled, 1996 by Gregory Crewdson

Photography is a frustrating medium. Fragmentary, frozen and mute – photographs can never match the immersive pleasures of film or music. So why bother with film sets and lighting crews? The simple process of making pictures is rich enough. "I always wanted to be a photographer," said Lee Friedlander, "But I never dreamed I would be having this much fun. I imagined something much less elusive, much more mundane."

- [See more of Crewdson's Fireflies here.](#)

48 Comments

1. i agree. "The Americans" is pure poetry. see. and so is Minor White. and Friedlander.

Comment by j zorn — July 17, 2007 @ 11:03 pm

2. great post Alec. having just ingested Mirrors and Windows recently (for the first time) and reading the new PDN... well you've touch on much of what i've been thinking about lately.

to the point of your last post as well. we have a group of photographers here that has lunch together every tuesday. it's a brilliantly diverse group, that i'm so fortunate to be a part of. great characters and great conversation. i have to say that i feel so cheated when our 1 hour a week gets derailed on digital and equipment talk. we accomplish so much more when we just talk about the art and our process. our collective excitement is electric. although important, there's no passion in the tech talk.

on of my favorite quotes from Mirrors and Windows –

"In those circumstances where there seems a conflict between the two goals, I will try my best to favor clarity, on the grounds that clear error may be more instructive than vague truth"

Comment by ben — July 17, 2007 @ 11:28 pm

3. "Whether you are Minor White or Robert Frank, almost every photograph starts with an act of pure description – a window. But every now and then you catch a glimpse of the photographer's reflection. The mirror is just another function of the window:"

I am interested in this part of the entry that you have placed here, for as you seem to say that the mirror is just another function of the window, but aren't mirrors just windows themselves? For what we view when approaching a mirror, or the reflection, is really the skin of what we are talking about... Its not the object of the mirror or glass, but the shadowy figures described within all this. Think of this j. baudrillard

Comment by jaime — July 17, 2007 @ 11:28 pm

4. Alec, I've been growing increasingly overwhelmed in the past few weeks with all the things I don't know and feel I should know. Long lists of things to learn, much of it technical in nature. And yet at the same time the growing urge—more like compulsion or need—to work on the projects I've started and those I've not yet begun. These two—the technical, the personal—are at odds in my mind. It seems like I *should* know how to work with the kind of massive lighting setup diagrammed in *PDN*. But should is very different from want. And I don't *want* to learn that. I don't even want to *know* that. That's the kind of stuff that makes me want to zone out in front of reruns of bad TV shows. *The Americans*, on the other hand . . . that's the kind of stuff that makes me want to photograph.

Comment by Liz — July 18, 2007 @ 12:19 am

5. (Incidentally) I don't know how much investigation Crewdson did with his fireflies but there are many interesting things about them as summarized here:

The flash behavior of the firefly is a complex puzzle of timing, flash intensity and shape. The biology of the firefly has evolved in such a way that the firefly has the ability to perform these three factors. The flash of the firefly has been shown to distinguish not only the sex of the firefly but also the species. This is accomplished by varying the three factors in such ways that fireflies are able to produce twinkles, crescendo flashes and "J" shaped patterns. Male fireflies are fiercely competitive for the available females, and will go to great lengths in order to reproduce. Males will synchronize, interject, delay and mimic female signals in order to confuse other males as well as "win" a female. Predacious

females mimic the signals of females from different species, and when the male comes calling she grabs and eats him. ~ Firefly Flash Communication Behavior

I remember trying to put the J pattern to test with a small light of my own to see how many I could attract or provoke into flashing fits!

Comment by Philip — July 18, 2007 @ 1:07 am

6. Great post Alec, and I also feel similar sentiments as Liz... I suppose for certain kinds of work there is a necessary amount of technique or perhaps a better word: craft – involved. Seems an accumulated experience of crafting (in taking or making) a photograph is essential as a kind of “enabling” device. It probably increases the odds of a “acceptable” (sales) result. What’s great about this post is that it suggests to me that what will be remembered is the stuff driven mostly by the passion behind the lens in the first place... That kind of passion is infectious and never grows old.

Comment by Matt Niebuhr — July 18, 2007 @ 1:29 am

7. Sorry Alec, I am drifting away from the initial thread but I wanted to respond to Liz. Your comment about The Americans causing you to want to make photographs reminds me of two quotes I was just reading here:
<http://www.tate.org.uk/tateetc/issue2/sixreflectionsfrank.htm>

Mark Haworth-Booth, long-time former curator of photography at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London wrote: “Although I am not a serious photographer, two people always make me itch to pick up a camera. First, Henri Cartier-Bresson with his brilliance of timing, in which form, narrative and symbol merge in the famous “decisive moment”. Secondly, Robert Frank. He showed his mastery of this kind of photograph in his image of a little girl trotting down a London street past a hearse – and being dragged into it by every line in the picture.”

On the same page, Ed Ruscha wrote: “Seeing The Americans in a college bookshop was a stunning, ground-trembling experience for me. But I realised this man’s achievement could not be mined or imitated in any way, because he had already done it, sewn it up and gone home. What I was left with was the vapours of his talent. I had to make my own kind of art. But wow! The Americans!”

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 18, 2007 @ 1:38 am

8. I enjoyed this post, so much variety, while still very much on topic, thanks.

Comment by Eugen — July 18, 2007 @ 2:53 am

9. Very lovely post indeed, and thanks a lot for bringing up those Fireflies. I’ve never seen a work of Crewdson I liked that much before.

Comment by Philip — July 18, 2007 @ 4:14 am

10. So much to read, so much catching up to do.... damn internet.

I remember something Nathan Lyons said.
“It’s all very interesting....”

IOU Nathan, etc.

<http://lovelywaterparade.blogspot.com/2007/07/master-lee.html>

Comment by mark s — July 18, 2007 @ 4:47 am

11. Of course technique is very important to the art form, not as a matter 'per se', but only as background, as a sort of a very discrete backstage that remains behind the emerging poetry. When we talk about great works of art there is no way to ignore the straightness that links the sophistication of technique (or lack of) to the final form. This two aspects are so intricately, so mysteriously perfect as a whole... I can't imagine technique or any other aspect being applied in a way different from the one that stands before my eyes or ears. But I don't care about art that takes the 'virtuoso' aspect as its goal, and I even tend to consider that the kind of works based upon that attitude are not art at all.
(I'm portuguese and I apologize because I don't feel myself comfortable writing in English language).

Comment by Nuno de Matos Duarte — July 18, 2007 @ 6:22 am

12. i think learning the technical side of photography comes along slowly and naturally for most, because you take interest in technical details as soon as you realize that what you want to capture could benefit for something or other.

Comment by einars o — July 18, 2007 @ 8:22 am

13. Alec, when I read the Crewdson article on PDN, I thought about this entry in your blog (<http://alecsoth.com/blog/2006/09/22/faq-do-i-take-pictures-every-day/>).

I think the issue here is not about mirror and window but the industrialization of our society. Arts are becoming industries. (Compared to Hollywood movies, Crewdson's 6-figure projects are like student homework.) Although great art is still about original ideas and individual visions, the challenge is shifted to getting funds and managing big projects that dozens or even hundreds of families live on.

However the final products, if made right, do reflect the individual vision of the chief artist, as seen in Spielberg, Wall and Crewdson, or the industry standard, as in VF, SI and W.

By their own nature, candid photography and poetry are not produced at industrial scale. That is why they are hard to make and even harder to market. Our society demands big and expensive projects that take months and years to make but seconds and minutes to consume.

Comment by S. LIU — July 18, 2007 @ 9:13 am

14. Regarding Lee Friedlander, here is a link to a nice little story in yesterday's Times, about his son Erik, and their vacation trips as a family. Also an interesting link within that page, of an audio feed of Erik telling stories and playing:

<http://tinyurl.com/299f9e>

(NY Times, requires free registration).

Comment by Mark Tucker — July 18, 2007 @ 10:21 am

15. anyone else notice there are two 25 lights in that diagram?

Comment by jaime — July 18, 2007 @ 10:50 am

16. Bland photograph?! Alec, he's wearing a SPACESUIT!! Are you blind?

Philistine...

Comment by Nolan Smock — July 18, 2007 @ 11:26 am

17. Although the helmet visor in the VF cover comprises only about 5% of the photo, that's where 90% of my attention goes: trying to count the crew members, examining the light sources, etc. Wish I could get a couple of those black cloth hoisting guys to cover me on MY shoots! If I were that boy-wonder celebrity (I read the article and already forgot his name...) I'd be pissed. Clearly the photographer (Mark Seliger? I forget that too) is the star of this show.

Comment by Paul Shambroom — July 18, 2007 @ 11:50 am

18. Wonderful post!

Comment by Dan Sumption — July 18, 2007 @ 12:07 pm

19. I am pretty sure that John Szarkowski did not understand or like The Americans. They never bought any prints of the Americans until recently. A big hole in MOMA's collection that Peter Galassi has been trying to fill. Also MOMA refused to carry The Americans when it came out in 1959. Something that Mr. Frank still remembers.

Comment by Double E — July 18, 2007 @ 12:56 pm

20. A search for jazz musicians discussing the nature, benefits and drawbacks of 'technical skills' on their performance will show exactly the same pros and cons as expressed in your post.

Comment by PeeWee — July 18, 2007 @ 2:12 pm

21. This is a tangent in response to Double E.:

When The Americans was published, John Szarkowski did not understand it and did not like the book but by 1963 he understood its importance and convinced Beaumont Newhall, who absolutely hated it, to include Robert Frank as one of only four 'contemporary' photographers in the 1964 revision of his History of Photography.

John was not at MoMA in 1959. Edward Steichen was still there. He was a big supporter of Frank and he organized the 1962 two-man exhibition with Harry Callahan. John started later in the year so the blame should be left at Steichen's feet, not John's.

I would love to see a list of what photography books MoMA 'carried' in 1959. Did they have a book shop then? They did miss a great opportunity to acquire prints in 1962 but by the early 1990s they had at least a dozen prints from The Americans. About three years ago, they acquired another dozen or so.

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 18, 2007 @ 3:06 pm

22. In regard to the images of the fireflies:

I recently found a copy of an exhibition catalog by Emmet Gowin, Mariposas Nocturnas – Edith in Panama. I had never seen this part of Gowin's work. It includes beautiful portraits of Edith, with time exposures of moth flight at night. Emmet's images reminded me of how magical a photographic moment can still be after all of these years of technical innovation.

Here's a link to the Pace Gallery with just a few images:

<http://www.artnet.com/Galleries/Exhibitions.asp?gid=139022&cid=97688>

Comment by Arne — July 18, 2007 @ 4:49 pm

23. This whole argument is a little pointless. I've seen fantastic stage photos and some of my friends are doing very interesting work in that medium. We're all friends and we all respect what the other is doing whether it's documentary or staged.

Alec you could say to a degree that your portraits are staged. Surly it's more the talent of the person behind the lens to draw the emotions out of the people they're photographing; the strength of their vision and also their ability to let go and lose themselves in the image. With respects to Crewdson I'd agree that the shots are too complicated and the images themselves sterile, perhaps that's his aim? Personally I think he should be doing lighting in films rather than making photos.

Maybe there are simply more people pursuing staged photography because it is in some art circles it is considered a higher form of photography, which is a load of crap. What is perhaps more worth keeping in mind is that like any form of photography there are a few who are naturals and very good at what they do, whether it's staged or not. The rest is a matter of personal aesthetics. I love Arbus but don't like HCB just as I like Tillmans and not Crewdson. How they arrived at the final image matters little but more my emotional reaction to it.

Comment by pj — July 18, 2007 @ 6:45 pm

24. Alec,
thank you for always being so brutally f*cking honest.

It is refreshing and appreciated.

Comment by davidbram — July 18, 2007 @ 7:37 pm

25. PJ, Who said I'm making an argument against staged photography? The fireflies, at least the one above, are in a sense staged. And yesterday I mentioned that I like Cumming and Krims. But, yes, I plead guilty to believing that the process behind the pictures sometimes alters the way I experience the pictures. Crewdson makes a point to say that he made the pictures, alone, after the breakup of his marriage. Does that story alter the way I read the pictures? Absolutely.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 18, 2007 @ 7:50 pm

26. Alec,

I think you might have the emphasis of this post a bit off. The experience of " God, I want to make photographs, after seeing this" is not about effort or naturalness. It , for me at least, is about the revelation of complexity, meaning, and insight that art can give.

I always want to make pictures after seeing a new Atget, or a Jeff Wall for that matter.

The Crewdson's photo (and his work in general) only reminds me never to rent the DVD of Poltergeist III.

Whether it's a painting by Gerhard Richter, or Cecily Brown, or the poetry that so moves you. It's always something that confers meaning and in it's own ways beauty. Things that have nothing to do with, trivializing or exacting melodrama.

The skill needed to be a Robert Frank, or Lee Friedlander is in the end a far great task to replicate then the multiplicity of lights and assistant needed to make a Vanity Fair cover or a Gregory Crewdson triviality.

But the lights and assistants needed for the great and original work of Jeff Wall certainly doesn't preclude their use. Wall is that kind of artist you couldn't have predicted in the early 1980's, someone with the startling eye of a Robert Frank, who then insists on keeping his vision from the street in his head, and then going home and building them.

God bless him, what a pain in the ass that all must be.

Good pictures always makes me wish I had more time and greater concentration.

Comment by John gossage — July 18, 2007 @ 8:25 pm

27. John – I hate it when people tell me I’m wrong – especially when they are right. Your point about Wall is on target. Crap.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 18, 2007 @ 8:50 pm

28. sorry alec I wasn’t pointing the finger at you but more referring to the tone of some of the above posts. I should have said “Aren’t some of Alec’s portraits set up?” it wasn’t meant as a question directed at you.

I don’t know if you need to be aware of the story behind the work, if the work is good then that will come through. Just looking at crewdson’s firefly images you can feel that emotion; there is life behind black & white paper, life which is sorely missed in his more applauded work. I guess whether it is staged or not the image has to come from the world, it has to be something the viewer can relate to; an organic element needs to remain. To put it simply what truth are you perusing? What discoveries could be made through a project, rather than what I can work on for my next show.

Tillmans said something along the lines of that he’s not interested in the authenticity (with regards as to whether a moment was captured candidly or the scene was set up by the photographer) of what is happening in front of the lens but rather the authenticity of the intent of the person behind it.

The documentary / staged photography is somewhat a beat up by the art market. I know in my part of the world there is a current trend towards constructed photography; in fact the major institutions rarely show any other form. It’s funny to think that stems from the age old hang up of photography trying to justify and be as much an art form as painting. Obviously an anxiety held by people who’ve never worked on and put together a documentary project. Photography had an amazing capacity to capture the edges of things, edges that hint to something greater, edges which could not be articulated in any other way. Perhaps this is why grand staged photos where everything is controlled can be so dull

Comment by pj — July 18, 2007 @ 8:57 pm

29. just saw john’s above post and realized i didn’t need to post the above.

Comment by pj — July 18, 2007 @ 9:02 pm

30. “The Americans is as much an act of romantic self-expression as it is a commentary on America.”
Are you sure?
Hey, it’s your blog. You can make as many crass statements as you like...

Comment by Jon Lister — July 18, 2007 @ 9:38 pm

31. No problem PJ. The whole reason I started this post was because of that quote about Kudelka showing his pictures to Szarkowski. Szarkowski’s response seemed so genuine. I think it is a feeling a lot of us share when we see good work.

Wall is so cerebral. And my knowledge of his process doesn’t make my heart thump. But he is damn good. It is undeniable. (Crap!). And after seeing the retrospective, I was indeed anxious to get to my own work.

On a related note, have a look at what Gerry Badger just posted here

Comment by Alec Soth — July 18, 2007 @ 9:40 pm

32. “I’m always looking outside, trying to look inside. Trying to say something that’s true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what’s out there. And what’s out there is always changing.” -Robert Frank

Comment by j zorn — July 18, 2007 @ 10:09 pm

33. I don't think the VF shot is all that typical or bland- its a VF cover, they have thier look. Its catchy. And also I like seeing reflections of crews wrking, [seems deliberate? bit of a departure from the norm?] kind of reveals all that staged mystery, or lack of. As far as dividing photography up into 2 groups...well lets just stop and think about that for a moment, its kind of a small #. Personally I would'nt be so bold. Its a tree w/ deep roots today and many branches. Crewdson is a MACHINE! His wrk is heavy and perturbing and has a tendency to throw you into confusion. Mental agitation. The finished product is extremly important. It does not make me want to shoot, Atget makes me want to shoot. Fortunately we are not all Robots....yet.

Comment by w robert angell — July 18, 2007 @ 11:26 pm

34. The VF cover is great in its context: a commercial portrait for VF. In that sense it is honest and unpretentious. It doesn't necessarily inspire one to shoot, but it is a fine celeb portrait. From what I can tell from the reflection, the actual crew is four or five people. The large group in the back are more than likely VF ADs, talent enterouge, etc.

Crewdson's bloodless, shallow work with its hundreds of hot lights is simply pretentious. I laughed when I saw the lighting diagram. It is such a waste of effort. I feel more "moved" by a back issue of VF than by any of Crewdson's photos, with the exception of the firefly shots.

Comment by T. Marquez — July 19, 2007 @ 9:47 am

35. anything is better than that enviro issue where Leo looks like he is about to club a baby seal...

Comment by einars o — July 19, 2007 @ 3:17 pm

36. Alec, I was literally working all day on something about The Americans and wrote something very similar to your statement that "The Americans is as much an act of romantic self-expression as it is a commentary on America". Then I read this post. Again, Soth? Again you try to increase my love for you? Where does it end?

Anyway, The Americans is very personal book; it's Frank's opinion and his rendering of the tenor in the US at that moment... not a Life magazine assignment. It's much more than a straightforward documentation of 1950's America, it's a personal vision.

I have a lot more to say, but it's almost midnight and that means its about 2 1/2 hours past my normal bed time. It's possible I'll wake up to find that I've written total gibberish here because I'm pretty much sound asleep.

Comment by Zoe Strauss — July 19, 2007 @ 11:00 pm

37. Personally I don't shoot anything like Gregory Crewdson, but I like some of his work, because I like cinematography. His work reminds me a little of an insane Jack Cardiff.

Here's a guy who goes through the same effort (and more) that you do on a movie set and then he takes one exposure, instead of 24 per second. I also like the idea of telling stories in a series of pictures.

But what is interesting, fun and challenging is going out into the real world and finding a Gregory Crewdson type shot that is not set up.

But these moments are rare and they only last an instant, like exotic particles generated in a particle accelerator.

I think Richard Kalvar somehow manages that on a consistent basis. Somehow he manages to capture this surreal parallel world, that exists in the same time and space as ours. Maybe it only exists in his eye, because that's the way he sees the world.

And the amazing thing is that in 'Earthlings' we are looking at 40 or so plates that he took over a period of decades, but they all fit in that same world, like it would reveal itself to him randomly, offering a glimpse and he just happened to be there with a Leica in hand.

Feli

Comment by Feli di Giorgio — July 20, 2007 @ 1:28 pm

38. Hey John Gossage,

Thought you were in Berlin? Anyway, good to have your thoughts on this straight versus synthetic argument, which seems to have spread over several threads. Which maybe gives some idea of how this particular issue seems to be vexing us particularly at this moment in photographic history.

Anyway, good to have your thoughts, which are right to the point. Basically, it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it. And instead of pigeonholing art – this approach versus that – which can tend to prejudice us and stop us from looking properly, we ought to be looking at the work and asking ourselves. Does it succeed in what it's doing? Is it worth doing in the first place? And above all, does it speak with passion, intelligence and complexity rather than calculation, unoriginality and superficiality.

I remember – many years ago – talking to Garry Winogrand at the G. Ray Hawkins Annual Picnic and Softball Game. All West Coast photography was in attendance, most of them mixed media photographer/printmakers to one degree or another.

Garry waved his arm and pointed to the assembled throng. 'You know, all these kids here, they're great kids – but their work is absolute shit.'

Comment by Gerry Badger — July 20, 2007 @ 3:06 pm

39. I remember back in about 1981 or so, I was a young kid, living in Los Angeles, working as a commercial photo assistant. I had come out of a photojournalism program, (Western Ky. University), but at that time, in my eyes, Winogrand was God. I followed everything he did. I'd never seen a picture of him, and always wondered what he was like. The rumor was that he hung out in the mornings in Farmers Market, at the corner of 3rd and Fairfax, and he'd sit there and drink coffee and watch people. I always wanted to go there and figure out which one he was.

At some point, I'd stopped assisting and was preparing to move back East, and I had (what I thought) was a great idea, to come back to my home town and photograph these local politicians in my town, ala Avedon, (my other God). So one morning, I got up the nerve, and I found Garry Winogrand's phone number (on directory assistance!), and I called him on the phone, and asked him what he thought of the idea. He listened for a few seconds, and then started screaming at me about "how could I ever think about this until I'd actually shot the pictures!", or something to that degree. Imagine Tom Waits, with that voice, being really irritated.

At that point, with my tail between my legs, I politely hung up the phone and thanked him for his time. It was a great lesson for a young kid — that the cart comes BEFORE the horse.

PS. Here's a Lee Friedlander picture of him, dated 1957. Somehow, Gary Busey comes to mind:

<http://tinyurl.com/2wp5su>

Comment by Mark Tucker — July 20, 2007 @ 4:36 pm

40. that story is hilarious!

Comment by w robert angell — July 20, 2007 @ 10:25 pm

41. Correction:

The name of the Kavlar book is 'Terriens', not 'Earthlings', although that would make a good title for a book.

Feli

Comment by Feli di Giorgio — July 21, 2007 @ 4:36 am

42. Getting back to Alec's first statement "I'm glad I didn't have to take this picture. All of that equipment looks like a drag" I totally agree. There's always gonna be 2 schools of thought, but for me, I always want the option to get up and go if I want to. Move around, follow the light. Not have to dismantle 4 lights, battery packs etc. Even if I had a crew the way Mark has for the VF shoot, I still would want to be able to move around. To me that's what photography is about. Finding what's out there. Even in fashion. David LaChapelle is amazing in what he does, but I would rather take a Bruce Weber image or Helmut Newton anytime! This kinda happened to me at a shoot I did last month. The client hired 2 photographers. When I arrived, the other photographer asked where my equipment was, I said it was in my trunk. When we got to the location, I got out my 2 bags, set up my camera and flash and went to work with the models. I had literally taken 200 shots before he set up his 2 light system. I was running around with all the models getting all kinds of shots and bringing movement and fun into the photographs. End result, the client called me 2 weeks later for another shoot, by myself. As long as your happy, has always been my thought, and this "way" makes me happy.

Comment by Roberto Badillo — July 21, 2007 @ 7:58 am

43. Heh. Reading that Crewdson article in PDN exhausted me. More like film making than photography.

Thanks for the wonderful post.

Comment by Eric Hancock — July 22, 2007 @ 10:17 am

44. For some reason, I cannot get this S. Liu quote out of my head:

"By their own nature, candid photography and poetry are not produced at industrial scale. That is why they are hard to make and even harder to market. Our society demands big and expensive projects that take months and years to make but seconds and minutes to consume."

Everything is speeding up at breakneck speed, and I notice that I just blow through these Blogs, and bodies of work like I'm eating M&Ms or popcorn. I know you can't stop time, and you can't even slow it down, but it does make you wonder about how people are viewing work today, on the web, at broadband speeds, versus how they used to view bodies of work, even five or ten years ago.

I remember my "old method" of viewing work — I'd get in the car, and drive out to our local independent bookstore, and I'd walk over to the Photography section, and I'd pull up a wooden bench, and it was like a small, quiet search for New Gold — to see what new books had been published since I'd been there last, and hopefully someone else had already secretly busted open the cellophane wrapper, so I wouldn't have to do it and feel guilty. I'd sit there for sometimes hours at a time, slowly turning the pages, and smelling the ink, and really pondering the images. In its own small way, it was a special event.

Now, I get up in the morning, make my coffee, check my email, (while some of the Blog pages are loading in Firefox), let my dogs out, and I blow thru the blogs at wildwire speed. Now, I've discovered Google Reader, so now, I'm not inconvenienced by having to go to someone's "old page" (maybe as old as three or four days!). I'm viewing these images on a laptop screen, (while checking my email if the page doesn't load fast enough for my new impatient standards), and usually am also doing one or two other things at the same time. The thought of having to get in the car, and drive to Borders or another "real" bookstore, and hassle with parking, and door dings, and the like, and risk getting there and there has been no new work published, well, that is just unthinkable.

The only upside, (and it's a real upside), to the web version versus the printed book version, is that I'm seeing work from MANY more people. I guess that's a good thing.

I'm not sure what I'm trying to say, but life is just blowing by me lately, and I'm not sure it's all a positive thing.

Comment by Mark Tucker — July 23, 2007 @ 2:30 pm

45. I know the feeling Mark. Isn't it funny how we use the web to talk about how the web is making us crazy. I did it here:

<http://alecsoth.com/blog/2007/05/21/back-online/>

Comment by Alec Soth — July 23, 2007 @ 2:43 pm

46. >>>

I know the feeling Mark. Isn't it funny how we use the web to talk about how the web is making us crazy. I did it here:

<http://alecsoth.com/blog/2007/05/21/back-online/>

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It was S. Liu's last sentence that really nailed it. And it was that one image of Robert Frank's wife, in the passenger seat of that car, that really slapped me upside the head. I just know that certain mindset that you get into, when you're driving and shooting and exploring, and you're "on", like someone else said, "antennae up", (maybe Martin Parr). But just that AMOUNT of time allows you to think, and to sink in, and to let your internal clock just slow down a tad. It's just got to be healthy.

I was just trying to put my head inside of Robert Frank's head, as he was driving, driving, driving, and roaming around, and shooting those classic images, and just wondering how it would be different if the same project would be tackled in the year 2007.

I also wonder how this "speed-up" affects younger photographers, with their iPhones, and their text messaging, and their "got to be in touch 24/7" way of living. Just wondering if their time increments are now just so much shorter.

Lots to think about, on this topic, but I gotta run — I hear my iPhone ringing...

Comment by Mark Tucker — July 23, 2007 @ 2:58 pm

47. I finally got a hold of the issue of PDN. I can't think of two more diametrically opposed photographers than Koudelka and Crewdson. Alec, you wrote, "Photography is a frustrating medium" but could you imagine needing to have a couple of meetings with your line producer like Crewdson before even exposing any film!?!

Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 23, 2007 @ 11:17 pm

48. The reflection in the helmet reminds me of the mirror in Van Eyck's 'Betrothal of the Arnolfini' (painted in 1434).

.. still an interesting effect some 573 years later !

Comment by Dr Gonzo — July 25, 2007 @ 7:26 am