

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 9, 2007

Poetry and Papageorge

Filed under: Papageorge,poetry — alecsothblog @ 11:07 pm

The photographer (and Yale professor) John Pilson recently sent me a fascinating document – a review of Edward Weston’s 1946 MoMA Exhibition written by Clement Greenberg (click here for the PDF). At the conclusion of this fascinating text, Greenberg writes the following:

If one wants to see modern art photography at its best, let him look at the work of Walker Evans, whose photographs have not one half the physical finish of Weston’s. Evans is an artist above all because of his original grasp of the anecdote. He knows modern painting as well as Weston does, but he also knows modern literature. And in more than one way, photography is closer today to literature than it is to the other graphic arts. (It would be illumination, perhaps, to draw a parallel between photography and prose in their respective historical and aesthetic relations to painting and poetry.) The final moral is: let photography be “literary.”

Tod Papageorge most definitely agrees. It seems he had literary ambitions for the medium from the beginning:

Photography and poetry have been yoked together for me since I first picked up a camera in 1962. In fact, I became obsessed with photography virtually from that moment, an obsession ignited because I saw in it a way to make poetry – which I’d tried doggedly to write for the three previous years – without suffering the anguish of sitting in place and ceaselessly sifting words together (not imagining how much more pain being a photographer could extract). – from Papageorge’s essay, *Words for Pictures*, in his book *Passing Through Eden*.

Papageorge’s clearest articulation of this relationship between photography and poetry is made in his introduction to Garry Winogrand’s book, *Public Relations* (1977):

A photograph is just a picture – or, as Winogrand would have it, “the illusion of a literal description of a piece of time and space.” It is as wanton a fiction as any description; but it is also, of course, a particularly convincing one because it so specifically locates and describes what it shows. As a poet knows that the words he chooses for his poem will, by their particular combination, resonate with a power that is the gift of language itself, so a photographer has at his disposal a system of visual indication that, even without his conscious deliberation, will describe the world with a unique, mimetic energy.

Auduen’s observation that “it is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words,” could also be said of the photographer’s relation to the things of the physical world: that he cannot invent them. By being fictions and, at the same moment, returning their

subjects to us with a compelling fidelity, both photographs and poems work with the same surprise. Atget's beech trees will never shade us, any more than Frost's birches will, but both have been given a "local habitation and a name," both mediate between our experience and our sense of the-world-as-it-apparently-is, and both strike us as if they were simultaneously remembrances and revelations.

The genius of *Passing Through Eden* is its structure. It is the "particular combination" of pictures that makes them resonate. Many photographers forgo this ambition and assemble their pictures in categories and clumps (Friedlander is a good example). Others, like Arbus, stack all of their chips on the individual image. I suspect Winogrand didn't care about any of this, he was too busy making pictures. What makes *Passing Through Eden* great is that Papageorge did care:

Since I believe—and teach—that photography is, for some photographers anyway, a practice at least as close to writing as the other visual arts, I thought why not put my money where my mouth is and make something that exposes that belief by demonstrating it not only with pictures, but also in the literal way the sequencing of those pictures parallels and, to some degree, calls up the elemental narrative we all know. – Tod Papageorge, from an interview with Richard B. Woodward, 2006

6 Comments

1. I don't like much how this started but i love how it ended.

"Modern painting", "modern literature"... I really don't like to use the word "modern" (or "post-modern"...), it's so ambiguous! I'd prefer "contemporary", if that would be the intention.

"Photography is closer today to literature(...)" Hasn't it always? Photography has always been photography, right from the cave men. "(...)than it is to the other graphic arts." Oh I really disagree, it's exactly as much as any other "graphic" art. Or "art", to be more precise – poetry is everywhere.

"The final moral is: let photography be "literary."" Couldn't agree more.

And then, would it sound too offensive or arrogant if I'd say that I picked up a camera one year ago for the first time and discovered by myself everything Papageorge is saying? And I would add:

"it is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words" This is very relative or ambiguous and I find it fundamentally wrong. On a literal approach, I'd tell Auduen to have a look at surrealist poetry. On a more subjective approach, I'd say the job of poets is precisely to constantly reinvent words! Exactly the same goes to photography.

Again, completely agree with the conclusions, both yours and Papageorge's. "It is the "particular combination" of pictures that makes them resonate." I first witnessed this when I saw the work of Nozolino "FAR CRY" (<http://www.steidville.com/books/140-Far-Cry.html>), and then Daido's "Paris from visions of Japan" slideshow (<http://moriyamadaido.com/gallery/gallery.html>).

Narrative is key word.

Comment by Tomé Duarte — July 10, 2007 @ 9:36 am

2. I always thought its relation to poetry was because both of them can begin to hint at certain things but neither of which make absolutely profound statements or produce facts. Photography has always been like this and this way of thinking about photography has been taught since around Walker Evans' time but I think this relation is thought of as being "the" way to approach photographs...I feel this has led to stagnation in photography.

Comment by Dan — July 10, 2007 @ 10:23 am

3. Alec,

Bill Christenberry's first show in New York was viciously panned in the NYT. Bill was crushed. A year or 2 later he had his first museum show at the Corcoran. Walker Evans wrote the catalogue essay. In it Evans said that each of the photos was a poem. A final thought...as a collector and as a poet, I have found it useful, as a writing exercise, to write poems about specific art works or work by a particular artist. It also helps me crystalize my thinking about specific works or a body of work.

Jack

Comment by Jack Drake — July 10, 2007 @ 10:54 am

4. Hi Alec, You might be interested in my review of Papageorge's show at Pace-McGill. I was intrigued at 1st because he talks/writes about photography as articulately as anyone on the planet, but I subsequently decided his pictures really do carry the weight.

Comment by Tim Connor — July 10, 2007 @ 11:15 pm

5. [...] As others have pointed out, Papageorge makes an inextricable link between photography and writing—particularly the composition of a collection of photography as parallel to the composition of a story. In a recent article about Papageorge in NY Magazine, he is quoted at scowling at aspiring graduate students, “Your work looks like it was made by someone who has never read a book,” a clear indication that to him, the literary-photographic relationship is paramount. In *Passing Through Eden*, the opening narrative equates to the first six chapters of the Book of Genesis and subsequently, the world is created, inhabited, follied upon, and Central Park is a microcosm for all things good and greater. I like the idea of a powerful narrative guided by his nostalgic, but timeless images. [...]

Pingback by » Blog Archive » Passing Through Eden — July 11, 2007 @ 12:18 am

6. Alec,
Thank you for your work on this topic. I am in NYC for the summer working as an intern. This has gotten me more excited about making pictures than I have been all summer. Because of this discussion I spent 5 hours making pictures in central park today.

Unfortunately I’m almost as slow with my Hasselblad as I am with my Deardorff and I only shot 2 rolls!

It has been great reading.

-Mark

Comment by Mark Sperry — July 11, 2007 @ 12:30 am