

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 23, 2007

Two Thumbs Undecided

Filed under: [crying & flying, on blogging](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:39 am

In an excellent [recent post](#), Jen Bekman said something I've been meaning to say: "Just because I'm writing about something doesn't necessarily mean that I'm recommending it."

I just returned home from a trip to California. While I was gone I only managed to put together two meager posts. [The first](#) was twenty-six words pointing readers to Chad Muthard's [Photo Final Four](#). [The second](#) was seven words comparing the work of David LaChapelle and Jill Greenberg.

Both of these posts generated a good deal of feedback. Since I've highlighted these subjects many readers think I'm recommending them. I'm not. "If I don't specifically say I like it, or don't," writes Jen, "it means that I haven't decided. (And I might never even give it enough thought to form an opinion.)"

I can see how this might be frustrating for readers. But Jen is right – opinions take time. I'm not interested in splattering my gut reaction. Sometimes I need to send up the test balloon and give it time to figure things out.

So after a little reflection, here is what I think:

1) I agree with [Isaac](#) that Chad's Final Four game is the equivalent of sports talk radio. When I [previously mentioned](#) that I'm a fan of sports talk (even though I don't watch sports) I wrote that "it is a joy to listen to the nerds and statisticians sink their teeth into something entirely meaningless."

2) "Should Alec, Ulrich, and Christian Patterson really be on that list?" [asks Avedont](#). No. But this isn't a real tournament. It is a silly blog game. I suspect the fact that we are all bloggers had more than a little to do with our inclusion.

3) The reason I posted on LaChapelle & Greenberg was purely visual. While browsing through the current issue of Art and Auction, I saw the image of Gwen Stefani by Greenberg and the ad for LaChapelle's show at Shafrazi. The first thing that struck me was the similar use of rear lighting and image vignetting. But as I thought about the two photographers, I became aware of other similarities. LaChapelle and Greenberg both started in the commercial arena but now exhibit regularly in galleries. Both like slick images. Both like to shock.

So what do I think of these artists? My feelings are mixed. Except for his remarkable film [RIZE](#), a little LaChapelle goes a long way. But he has his place. That place is normally in magazines and I'm skeptical about

seeing his tableaux work on the wall, but the [floating figures](#) look good. They remind me a bit of [Gary Schneider's nudes](#) and a number of the jumping photographers: ([Kerry Skarbakka](#), [Li Wei](#), etc). As for Greenberg, the aura around the pictures (the lollipops, the Bush critique) is incredibly shallow. But the pictures themselves pack a punch.

4) The most valuable thing about LaChapelle, Greenberg and the Final Four is that it got me thinking about what kind of commercial photography stands the test of time. The first photographer I thought about was Philippe Halsman. Halsman produced tableaux pictures like LaChapelle:



Dali Atomicus by Philippe Halsman

His great Jumpology work also reminds me of LaChapelle's floating figures:



Mrs. Edsel Ford by Philippe Halsman

Finally, Halsman hysterical pictures of the French actor Fernandel are reminiscent of Greenberg:



Halsman stands the test of time. His work is light and humorous but somehow always marked by greatness. Only time will tell if LaChapelle and Greenberg (or Alec, Ulrich, and Patterson) will join him in the Big Dance. Whatever the case, Halsman provides a great example of a commercial photographer who holds up.

One who doesn't hold up, but also bears resemblance to LaChapelle and Greenberg, is [Howard Schatz](#).

Compare LaChapelle's floating pictures and Schatz's water dancers:



Or Greenberg's children and Schatz's actors:



Rosie Perez

1. You're a woman whose sister has just called to say she knows you slept with her husband.

2. ...an L.A. girl gang member who has just been cut off on the 405 by a blonde in a Hummer on her cell phone.



Rosemary Harris

1. You are a loving wife after a visit to an assisted-living facility, where your husband can no longer remember your name
2. ...reading a New York Times obituary of the man who was your first lover.

What makes Halsman great and Schatz empty? I might need some time to figure that out.

18 Comments

1. With a few exceptions, denizens of the internet are generally pretty smart. While many are happy to splatter gut reactions (or deep seeded opinion for that matter) I don't think as many would leap to the conclusion that you're recommending the artists you highlight. The venn diagram of commercial and fine art photography, rapidly turning into a perfect circle, has been a theme of your blog for some time and these are great examples.

It is interesting that you have previously had concern over misconstrued negativity, and now you are taking care to address misconstrued positivity. To me, this highlights urge to rank and compete and impose order on the chaos that is endemic on the internet and probably human behaviour. It's ludicrous to do this with art with anything but a broad brush, and that why I enjoyed the folly of Chad's competition.

Comment by rob — March 23, 2007 @ [6:49 am](#)

2. It's quite interesting to see first Jen's post and then yours. I think on my blog I have at least one such post. I guess it's the nature of the internet that makes this happen, where inhibitions to just send off something quickly are so much lower than in a real-world case. I think in the end, as a blogger one has to realize that there is no way to prevent misunderstandings – unless you want your posts come with the "certain restrictions apply" and pages of fine print like those that come along with credit-card applications.

Oh, and I'll always love that Dali photo – for me, the reason why it's great is the equivalent why the American Godzilla sucks and the Japanese ones are great: They really threw the cats and the water, and Dali had to jump (so what does this have to do with Godzilla? The Japanese Godzilla is a guy in a rubber suit, and they make almost no attempt to hide that). And that just adds the real charm, which you don't get when you try too hard (which is my main problem with those immensely goofy portraits at the bottom of the post).

Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — March 23, 2007 @ [7:14 am](#)

3. I'm glad you wrote about this. After I first received Chad Muthard's "Photo Final Four," I posted it, thinking it was ridiculous, but good for a laugh, and all in good fun. I thought people would look, laugh and move on.

Then you posted it, then Brian posted it, and then...and then...Watching the commentary unfold was like watching a car slide sideways down an iced-over highway. I could only sit and let things take their course; this thing had its own inertia.

Clearly, I didn't belong on Chad's bracket. That was part of the ridiculousness of it all. And there were too many great photographers who didn't appear on the bracket. Look me up in 20 years, maybe I'll have a shot at the list then. Maybe not.

That is why I quickly suggested the [family tree idea](#). I needed my own more objective, more constructive way of framing the issue, and I wanted people to consider this other way of thinking about the issues of history, influence, style and visual vocabulary/literacy.

P.S.

Don't forget LaChapelle's floaters' similarity to [Robert Longo](#). Same goes for Apple's latest [iPod ads](#).

Comment by [Christian](#) — March 23, 2007 @ [8:19 am](#)

4. Nature of the internet or more likely just people's insecurities on the table because the web seems to easily open wounds of ego. While the internet is absolutely filled to it's rim with opinion, a lot of people

still seem to take each of those opinions as an assault on their own beliefs and tastes. This is especially present when there is the illusion of "success" or "status" around the person who's opinion they find so shocking – as if the opinion of someone who seems to have power shames them into becoming sensitive about their own tastes.

All that to say... people are weird.

Comment by [Davin](#) — March 23, 2007 @ [9:49 am](#)

5. Yeah, this whole post is pretty much why I have always been so apprehensive about having my own blog. I feel like I might just be constantly addressing miscommunications and mistakes. But...at the same time, I like the idea of going with your gut instinct for the most part. Tends to work out, for me atleast. That's part of art. If I sat around and really analyzed everything and thought it through for a good week or month, I bet in a year or so I will still end up disagreeing with it. Show me someone who's not a hypocrite.

Although I will share this little nugget, since your post about the tournament I have had roughly 1000 people a day (sessions, not hits) on my website. Roughly 75% of them were referrals from your blog. Thats unheard of, and honestly quite scary. I was talking to Shane Lavalette last night about the fact that you kind of have to realize when you comment on this blog that if you say something ridiculous and are an asshole about it then you should probably take into consideration how many people are seeing it, not to mention how many of them are gallery representatives or other photographers that it wouldn't hurt to know, and now they might write you off as an asshole. Crazy. We both agreed drunken comments are out of the question.

As for the tournament..

I just kind of threw it together, i didn't go through terrible research at all, I just went with whoever came to mind at first, so yeah the whole blog scene might have had some affect, although I believe I had heard of everyone before I got involved in this whole universe of blogging. I agree though, lots of amazing people left out, next year someone else make one I guess.

And...

Alec,

"But this isn't a real tournament. It is a silly blog game."

Obviously, you are very very confused and did not receive the memo.

Did you not hear about the fight that broke out between Ulrich and Deutsch?

Blood everywhere. Kids thrown about.

THIS IS REAL LIFE, and you better pray to God that Meyerowitz doesn't catch you unexpectedly in a back alley somewhere.

Comment by [Chad Muthard](#) — March 23, 2007 @ [4:40 pm](#)

6. welcome to the internets.

Comment by [james](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [12:58 am](#)

7. i mean you post. and then you post.

Comment by [james](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [1:01 am](#)

8. uh oh, there appears to be floaters everywhere...

Denis Darzacq

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/gallery/2007/mar/23/darzacq?picture=329756707>

Sam Taylor-Wood

<http://www.whitecube.com/artists/taylorwood/selfportraitsuspended/>

Chris Cunningham/Portishead

Comment by [Ross](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [4:22 pm](#)

9. "Yeah, this whole post is pretty much why I have always been so apprehensive about having my own blog. I feel like I might just be constantly addressing miscommunications and mistakes." – Chad

I'd say go for it anyway. The more blogs there are the better. The more people write something (especially if it's not just the usual stuff that you can find on any forum) the better. Disagreements are the spice of life, even though on the internets, some people don't really know how much salt is too much. But that's OK. So get your own blog, and get started!

Comment by [JM Colberg](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [4:35 pm](#)

10. Chad, I agree with Joerg. Don't let the negative stuff get you down. Keep the faith. (Now if I can just listen to my own advice).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [9:40 pm](#)

11. Good work Ross. I meant to mention Taylor-Wood. I wasn't familiar with Darzacq. I'm trying to come up with the name of [this artist](#). Can someone help?

And we probably shouldn't leave out [Yves Klein](#) and [Bas Jan Ader](#). Who else am I forgetting?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 24, 2007 @ [9:41 pm](#)

12. Rosemary Laing, "Flight Research" 1999, she is from Australia. but its really the only piece of hers i have seen like this so i can't say if she is a genuine "floater", but its a nice cover image.

Comment by [Andrew Phelps](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [6:07 am](#)

13. Apply the bell curve to blogging. Some will be brilliant some will be crap most will be very average. It is not a media for sustainable greatness. It is very human.

Comment by [Ron Diorio](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [7:55 am](#)

14. keep it pure and have fun. responding to negativity on the internet (or in real life) is just wasted time and energy.

how i learned to stop worrying and love the blog.

Comment by [kevin](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [2:53 pm](#)

15. Where else can you find an interesting exchange on floating bodies than on this great site? The Halsmann photograph of Dali definitely has all the energy/movement that is so often found in LaChapelle's work. I prefer stillness in photographs, instead of "frozen" action – that is probably why I found your blog.

Comment by [Francisco](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [8:27 pm](#)

16. A couple of years ago there was a show called [Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight](#). I think [Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison](#) have floater tendencies.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — March 25, 2007 @ [8:45 pm](#)

17. Joerg and Alec,

I hear ya. I appreciate the encouragement, and if I wasn't so crazy with working I would be on it, but for now I guess I shall just have fun hanging out in the smoky loft(s).

Comment by [Chad Muthard](#) — March 26, 2007 @ [7:12 pm](#)

18. [...] Team jb gets shoutouts in three categories, fulfilling your Art, Photo and Cultural blogging needs... On the Art Krush Blog List, Personism is included in the Art section and the Hey, Hot Shot! blog is in the Photo section. Then Paul Laster interviews Alec Soth, saying "You recently sided with cultural blogger Jen Bekman's statement that "just because I'm writing about something doesn't necessarily mean that I'm recommending it." Naturally Alec's agreement with me and the citing thereof was the highlight of the interview for me, but you might beg to differ. [...]

Pingback by [Personism » Blog Archive » Krushworthy](#) — May 2, 2007 @ [3:18 pm](#)