

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 23, 2006

On becoming a curmudgeon

Filed under: [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 9:16 am

The terrific photographer [Bill Sullivan](#) recently dropped me and email about the blog and complimented my “nice edgy cranky take” on things. While he said this with kindness, I became suddenly worried. Do I sound cranky? I hope not. In the three weeks I’ve worked on this blog, I’ve tried to share my enthusiasm for vastly different kinds of photography. One of the reasons I’m sensitive is that I’ve recently encountered (with disappointment) two examples of great photographers sounding pretty crabby.



“Who is Sidney Sherman?” by Duane Michals

In the recent issue of W Magazine, Duane Michals, 74, talks about his new book, [Foto Follies: How Photography Lost Its Virginity on the Way to the Bank](#). The book includes photographic parodies of Cindy Sherman, Andreas Gursky and Wolfgang Tillmans. “These photographers all take the same picture and people pay \$300,000 for it, just because it’s big and in color,” says Michals, “I find it all very funny.”

Does anyone else get the feeling he doesn’t find it that funny? Moreover, I don’t agree with Michals. Those are three incredibly different photographers. Michals is a treasure. His work has a special place in the history of photography. I hope he doesn’t end his career with bitterness because Cindy Sherman’s pictures sell for more money. Sherman has her place, Michals has his. The money doesn’t mean anything.

I read a more extreme example of bitterness in the interview I [recently cited](#) with Robert Adams. At the end of the interview, Adams is asked: "Where do the political calamities of the recent years lead you?... The invasion of Iraq, the U.S. administration's endorsement of torture, its failure to engage the problem of global warming, the re-election – if that's what it was – of the Bush administration..."

Adams answers, "Kerstin [Adams' wife] and I have, like many, thought about leaving, and we continue to think about it, although our age is an obstacle. The question is where. Kerstin is from Sweden, and we admire many of the values there, so we consider it, but the language is a barrier for me. I had a Jewish teaching colleague who took the last train out of Germany. That's cutting it too close."

I've tried to shrug off this comment but I can't stop thinking about it. The pessimism is so deep. One of the reasons I value Adams' pictures so much is that he battles to find beauty in the broken landscape. In this interview it sounds like he has thoroughly lost the battle.

Maybe Adams was just having a bad day. Or maybe I'm misreading the interview. All I know is that I don't want to come off as bitter. I'm too young to become a curmudgeon. Life is beautiful and photography can help us see the beauty. If I start to forget this, will someone please knock me upside the head.

15 Comments

1. I think michals meant that they each make the same picture over and over not that they make the same pictures as each other.

Comment by [Christy](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [9:27 am](#)

2. I myself don't see (or read) any pessimism in your posts. Though, I think a better distinction would be critical discussion and honesty. (Which is one the things I love about your blog). Should we edit those things in order to sound neutral to every reader?

I do agree on the Michals work and a lecture in Chicago (which admittedly I didn't attend) further seemed to place his character as bitter.

But Adams I would have to disagree, even in the quote you mentioned. It merely seems like the guy is being honest and specifically here about politics. I know many people who are Roberts' age who seen generations of politicians, corruption, etc and to witness some of the events of the last 6 years can make one feel pessimistic. Though being pessismistic about politics is not giving up on beauty. One only look to his recent work to see that.

Comment by [Brian](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [9:35 am](#)

3. Christy, I still don't agree. Why they all continue to work in a distinct style, so does Michals (and just about every other photographer).

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [9:37 am](#)

4. You might be right Brain. But I'm still bothered by Adams' analogy to Nazi Germany. It suggests a serious loss of perspective. And his comment about [Terri Gross](#)? C'mon, don't be dissing my Fresh Air.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [9:41 am](#)

5. Like you, I am an admirer of Adams' photographic thinking and work, but these sorts of comments are beyond the pale. Does he really think that if he doesn't "get out" there will be a midnight knock on his door and he'll be spirited away? Yes, a serious loss of perspective, which stifles intelligent discussion about what is going on this country and the world.

As for a curmudgeon, I'd say you've got a long way to go. There's a big difference between having a strong opinion and being persistently negative.

Comment by [Todd W.](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [12:49 pm](#)

6. For what it's worth I don't think you sound curmudgeonly at all. I'm a big fan of your work and have been really enjoying the blog. It quickly moved to the top of my must read rss feed.

And as an aside Duane Michaels has produced some of my favorite photos/photo books and being dismissive of other photographers (and artists) is part of his schtick. I've heard him speak several times and he always seems to have a few biting comments... And his comment is ironic because recently I feel like he's fallen into the rut of shooting what I call older gay man art which mainly consists of fantasies about younger studly men which is pretty boring especially compared to the vast body of the work he did when he was younger.

Comment by [ted](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [1:16 pm](#)

7. Damn Alec sorry – didnt use spell check there!
I had tried to type the word provocative there always been a bad speler was meant to be a compliment, I think all internet conversation is just hot for whatever reason But the breadth of your topics is really cool though and actually seem to be getting more and more interesting

It is really kind of rare – and exactly what I'd like to see more of , would miss it if you didn't do it already told a bunch of people about it
And this too is actually a great subject , the inevitable bitterness of visual artists
as Andy Warhol was quoted (in relation to this very subject I think) in that really great new Burn's documentary
– shrug and say "...so what"

Comment by [Bill Sullivan](#) – September 23, 2006 @ [1:31 pm](#)

8. Being critical is -in my view- of the essence of many great artists. Adams is brave enough to say it in a country that lately does not accept much dissent.

Being optimistic and cheerful, life loving , doesn't have anything to do with being uncritical.

Michals is a great artist and he is referring to the way the art market works, and that doesn't make him wrong or bitter.

Being critical doesn't mean you are cranky. Otherwise it would mean that we should all get a lobotomy to watch this wonderful world.

I am an admirer of your work, in which I don't find a particularly "happy" or over optimistic view of the US.

Great Blog Andres Racz

Comment by [Andres Racz](#) – September 23, 2006 @ [7:33 pm](#)

9. re the comment about Nazi Germany, I can certainly see why he would say that – although I don't think things are that bad. Picasso made a great painting that hangs in Madrid about the bombing of Guernica by German-backed Franco planes. We've just seen cluster bombs used against civilian targets by US-backed Israeli planes. This is now so commonplace that it isn't material for artists. The US certainly has learned the lessons of Nazi propaganda by manipulating a population by keeping them frightened. There is the widespread use of torture. There exists a new class of 'disappeared' – people of Muslim origin with US citizenship detained without charge or access to lawyers. The list goes on...
Adams has been a fighter for all his life and he has seen no improvement, I can certainly understand how, in his later years, he can see no alternative but to flee...

Comment by [Julian](#) – September 24, 2006 @ [6:09 am](#)

10. [...] My recent post on becoming a curmudgeon generated some critical replies. I'd like to charge forth with a confident and overwhelming defense but I don't have the ammo or the bullet points. I'm going on instinct and a couple of interview blurbs. Scrutinizing our photographic elders isn't like scrutinizing Donald Rumsfeld or Britney Spears. We don't have a vast paper trail. Nor do I think Michals or Adams have done anything to provoke that kind of scrutiny. Both have produced significant work over a long period of time. And both have earned a right to spout off now and then. [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [Bowling to the elders \(especially Friedlander\)](#) – September 26, 2006 @ [8:16 pm](#)

11. I agree with Michals on Arbus. I feel she simply repeats the formula over the decades because it's easy and sells well. I don't think you can do the same all your life as an artist and keep being sincere. But I feel it about a lot of contemporary art. It's so obvious that artists work as cogs in the art market business, producing exactly what's expected and sold. The "big and color" is so so so so true, maybe sad but true, but true in the end. Just to be a punk, Alec, try to sell A3 sized prints of your photos in the "big art" market. I bet you they will not sell, no matter they're great photos and exactly as great as printed 5 foot long.

Comment by [Flaneur](#) – September 26, 2006 @ [10:12 pm](#)

12. in support of Duane and his rant on print size. Isn't the fad on 40 or 50 inch prints a little of the "bigger is better" mentality. We can so we do. All you can eat.... And.... it's only made for gallery walls. In the 'good ole days' when a 16x20 was considered a very large print it was intended for a mere mortal's

home. To quote – this time Michael Caine (in Austin Powers “it's not how big it is, but what you do with it”. I don't think Duane is bitter as you suggest, just bewildered.

Comment by [Frank](#) — September 28, 2006 @ [11:08 am](#)

13. Is this a republican blog?

Comment by [Anthony Ranieri](#) — October 7, 2006 @ [7:23 am](#)

14. Liking Terri Gross makes me a Republican? C'mon Anthony – get those knee jerks under control.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 7, 2006 @ [7:59 am](#)

15. [...] also...read alec discuss photography and crankiness. [...]

Pingback by [Graduate Photography and Digital Imaging](#) — March 26, 2007 @ [12:05 am](#)