

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 22, 2006

Surviving refinement

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:13 am

In my post on [Vik Muniz vs. Gabriel Orozco](#), Kathleen writes of Orozco: "For me, his photos are just....bad. They are sketches to a larger, more cohesive idea. (One where the end product is not a poorly shot/printed c-print)."

In response, Alexandre writes: "Do we still need "good" pictures? It's true that shots/prints of Orozco are poor, as poor as his sculptures in fact...What makes Orozco a genius is his incredible sense of the uncanny, the bizarre, the poetic poverty."

This got me thinking about lo-fi aesthetics. William Wegman (who reminds me of Muniz) began his career by producing raw and [hysterical videos](#).



Over time he refined his technical skills:



His work grew up but lost some of its charm. But what was he to do? I suppose he had the option of recreating the lo-fi look by continuing to produce faux-naïve videos forever. But that seems equally unsatisfying. How do you build a career on the armature of aesthetic rawness? There has to be something else at the root of the work. There has to be a subject with depth. The problem with Wegman is that this subject is, well, dogs. The roots don't go deep enough to survive the transition from raw to refined.

One example of someone who has survived this transition is Annie Leibovitz. Her primary subject, celebrity, isn't much deeper than dogs. But Leibovitz has often been able to sink in her teeth and pull out some great pictures. One of her best sub-genres has been [American music](#). Here is a raw and outrageous picture of Keith Moon in 1976:



During the eighties, Leibovitz took on lighting, props, color and a bigger negative. The pictures lost their edge and became all about artifice:



But Leibovitz worked through this. Since the nineties she has been producing incredibly refined images that nonetheless have a genuine soulfulness. Here is an image of Brian Willson in 2000 from her book American Music:



In some ways Leibovitz's work resembles that of the musicians she's photographed. Look at the [recent revival](#) of Bob Dylan. Sure, he did a [Victoria Secret ad](#) a couple of years ago. But he's also mastered his craft, battled the storms and come out the other end with something both refined and rich.

12 Comments

1. i think it's hard to really define "aesthetic rawness". a lot of famous photogs are more valued for their earlier rawer pictures than for what came later. Meyerowitz went from the rawest forms of b&w street stuff to refined pictures of Tuscany. Christenberry's brownie pictures stand up pretty well against his later stuff. i always thought Arbus' pictures were pretty raw (and her printing was always straightforward). would we have really wanted more refined Arbus photos?

Comment by j zorn — September 22, 2006 @ [11:26 am](#)

2. Arbus is a fantastic example. Her work was both raw and refined. The early pictures on Coney Island are actually a bit weaker than her mature work. But what about her 'Untitled' project? For me, those pictures suffered a bit by flaunting a kind of faux-naïveté. If she had lived, would this have been the way she continued?

I think it is unfair to point to Meyerowitz's work in Tuscany – his weakest project. His early b/w street work was great, and so was the color work. Then he changed. Cape Light is brilliant. I haven't seen much of the 9/11 pictures, but I appreciate his effort to document the place. He is an interesting case because he has continued to try new things. His documentary film, Pop, was excellent. I actually think Meyerowitz is a pretty good example of how to develop a career and keep trying new things. As with Dylan's Victoria Secret ad, we are willing to forgive the missteps because he keeps charging ahead. I think it would be sad if Meyerowitz was still doing those b/w Winogrand-ish pictures.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [12:48 pm](#)

3. terrific topic. one that transcends into all art forms. there is that great dave hickey essay about the mistakes, both rhythmic and harmonic, that contribute to rock and rolls power, (speaking of dylan). rock music as a whole, i think embodied aesthetic rawness for its first 15 years or so until record labels, record producers and the artists they promoted got too professional. the music was already great, it didn't need further refining. technology played an important role. by the eighties, recording technology had improved to the point where it was impossible to tell the difference between a drum machine and a real drummer. sadly, the technical perfection that was attained led to sterility, not better recordings....let's not get too pro!

Comment by [Jake Longstreth](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [5:00 pm](#)

4. Well put Jake. Hey, really nice paintings: <http://www.jakelongstreth.com/>

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [6:02 pm](#)

5. Regarding lo-fi aesthetics, [Michal Daniel](#) pointed me to his interesting site.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [10:38 pm](#)

6. Michal's work with the Palm Pilot camera is amazing. I've been watching his work for several years now. The link above does not work. <http://640x480.net/>

Thanks for the blog, Alec. It's on my reading list.

Comment by [jim arnold](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [10:51 pm](#)

7. Thanks guys! Ready for a book of the In Your Face lo-fi street portraits, anytime. Feel free to point me in the right direction. Here is the tightest edit for it I have, to date:

<http://www.640x480.net/book>

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [11:02 am](#)

8. P.S. No idea why the book link above doesn't work. If you care to look, click on my name and when the site pops up, add the word book to the URL string. Sorry, no idea how to make it work in a simpler manner.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — September 23, 2006 @ [11:13 am](#)

9. subject matter and the aesthetic approach to subject matter are two different things. subject matter has to have some depth no matter what approach one takes to it. low-fi by itself will not stand up. just as refined by itself. who has stayed low-fi (or went low-fi) and made it work? there must be a few.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — September 24, 2006 @ [12:13 am](#)

10. Andy Warhol made it work, for absolute starters.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — September 24, 2006 @ [2:21 pm](#)

11. [...] sparked by discussion on alec soth's website re: surviving refinement... in a nutshell...careers that begin as raw and become highly polished. the creator of this website linked it to the conversation. [...]

Pingback by [Graduate Photography and Digital Imaging](#) — March 26, 2007 @ [12:04 am](#)

12. [...] June 24th, 2007 The William Wegman show "Funney/Strange" has made its way to the Addison Gallery in Andover and although I have never been too big a fan of Mr. Wegman's work it was worth a trip. The show had a little bit of everything, literally. I was under the assumption that Wegman had made some conceptual films in the seventies and then once he got his famous dogs made a career out making 20x24 Polaroid photographs of them. That is not entirely true. The exhibition presents the artist's photographs, films, paintings, and drawings in an effort to display Mr. Wegman as a fine artist. Nowhere is there any mention in the gallery of Mr. Wegman's appearances on Sesame Street, Saturday Night Live, the David Letterman show or of all those t-shirts, posters, and doggie pillows. Behind all the jokes (that are one-liners) there is a certain relatable candor between the viewer (a bunch of old ladies and children at the gallery) and Wegman's dogs. Mr. Wegman has been able make a very long career out of a subject that does not have a lot of wings. Alec Soth wrote about this idea last year. What remains his best work for me is early dabbles in conceptual film and his recent paintings incorporating vintage postcards and the idea of what frames means in a sort of pop culture way. Posted by jonbakos Filed in gallery shows [...]

Pingback by [Jon Bakos | Blog » Blog Archive » Wegman at the Addison](#) — August 7, 2007 @ [8:26 pm](#)