

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 26, 2006

Bowing to the elders (especially Friedlander)

Filed under: [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 8:05 pm

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.

I'm a great admirer of photographers with long careers. Keeping your head above the waves of art world trendiness is an art form in itself. I've only been in the game for a few years. It is hard to think about surviving a few decades.

I just had the chance to see the Lee Friedlander retrospective at the [Jeu de Paume](#). The exhibition is overwhelming. Not only has Friedlander been productive for the last 40+ years, he's been consistently good. And not just good – he's continued to challenge himself. While every picture bears the mark of his unique take on the world, the subjects are as diverse as jazz singers, cherry blossoms, office work, nudes, self-portraits, factory life and family snapshots.

I've always known that Friedlander does his own printing. But a curator at the Jeu de Paume told me that Friedlander is in his darkroom each morning at the crack of dawn. You can feel it in the pictures. Friedlander could have hung up the tongs a long time ago. But there is an obsessiveness in his picture making that necessitates his own printing. Knowing that Friedlander is rocking the trays at 6am just adds to my experience of the work.

But what exactly is my experience of the work? When I have a positive response to photographs, one of two things happen. I either sit and stare in awe of the subject (race riots, Marilyn, the moon) or I have the desire to go out and see the world and make pictures for myself. My response to Friedlander is definitely in the second category. His work makes me want to make pictures. His work makes me want to use my eyes.

This is the second time I've seen the Friedlander retrospective...sort of. I saw it at MOMA last year. The museum was packed. A dozen people hovered around each 8x12" print. At Jeu de Paume, the crowds weren't as thick, but I still couldn't get through it all. Too many pictures. I have a theory that the best photo books don't have more than sixty pictures. I think the same might be true for exhibitions. Whether the prints are big or small,

there is only so much imagery we can take in at once. After awhile it all becomes a blur. If I were the curator of the Friedlander show I probably wouldn't have changed anything. Every single picture is damn good and every series is worthy of inclusion. But someday I'd love to see a Friedlander retrospective of sixty pictures. While the editing might break the curator's heart, the result could be breathtaking.

Here are a couple of snapshots I took at the Jeu de Paume:



7 Comments

1. I saw a piece of his recently at MoMA in New York and sat in front of it for the longest time staring. I share your fascination with his work, and I didn't realize he's still working. There is something about knowing that that's very inspiring.

Comment by [Tim Walker](#) — September 26, 2006 @ [9:16 pm](#)

2. looks like those off-white frames are popular. they were used in the Diane Arbus retrospective, too. i wonder who else has.

Comment by [aizan](#) — September 26, 2006 @ [11:36 pm](#)

3. I'm very jealous! I hope this comes to Barcelona. I always use his 'Stems' book as an example of how to work a subject. I also learnt so much about composition from his landscape book

Comment by [Julian](#) — September 27, 2006 @ [1:54 am](#)

4. On the frame topic, yeah. Those white frames are hot right now and with good reason. They look great with big color photos.
Alec, your use of white frames adds to the work.
I'm using white frames for my first solo show. BTW Alec, do you mount your photos to something and then frame them with the spacers? I don't want to use mattes and i love the way yours looked at Larry's joint!

Comment by [imgiordano](#) — September 27, 2006 @ [8:53 am](#)

5. I saw the Friedlander retrospective at MOMA last year. I found it wonderful to be able to see the fruits of such a long and productive career. The show was inspiring. But I agree, it was a bit exhausting and I really felt there was just too much work on display. I would love to see the 60-print version.

Comment by [Noah Addis](#) — September 27, 2006 @ [10:34 am](#)

6. I loved the show at MoMA, but found the way it was hung sapped some of the pictures energy. It seemed to be organized by subject matter, rather than the more spontaneous (I imagine) way the pictures would have been taken.

A 60 print limit is a great idea.

Comment by [ford](#) — September 27, 2006 @ [2:43 pm](#)

7. I think there is a difference with some shows that are crammed full of pictures among younger less established artists and someone like Friedlander. Most of his projects are just fantastic and it was great to be able to see an edit of each one at MoMA last year when they had it for people like me who don't get to see photo galleries in NY a lot. I think for books 40-60 is a good edit before it gets to be too much for a single project-

Comment by [Dan](#) — September 27, 2006 @ [9:40 pm](#)