

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 19, 2006

More on photographing sculpture

Filed under: [sculpture](#) — alecsothblog @ 9:23 pm

You might be wondering why I'm [spending a lot of energy](#) writing about sculpture. The truth is that in addition to being a failed painter (my first love), I'm also a failed sculpter. I never got under the influence of the European land artists (Long, Goldsworthy, Fulton, Nash). Here is a sculpture I made in college (1991 or so):



I still have a great fondness for this kind of work. In 2004 I had the pleasure to meet and photograph Andy Goldsworthy.



What is beautiful, of course, is the impermanence. I think this has a lot in common with photography. I'm reminded of a quote* by Henri Cartier-Bresson:

Actually, I'm not all that interested in the subject of photography. Once the picture is in the box, I'm not all that interested in what happens next. Hunters, after all, aren't cooks.

Photography, for me, is about the process. It is about wandering. Looking. Digging. The product is fine. It does its job stopping time. But mostly it is a charming reminder of the hunt.

I've pretty much given up the idea of making sculpture. But now and then I still get an itch. A couple of years ago I balanced a stack of farmhouse rubbish and took this picture:



Later I realized it looks like the superior images of Peter Fischli and David Weiss. I guess I should just stick to taking pictures.



PETER FISCHLI AND DAVID WEISS

Roped Mountaineers.

Black and white photograph

15 3/4 x 11 3/4 in. (40 x 29.8 cm).

Executed 1984-1985.

This work is from the series *Stiller Nachmittag* (A Quiet Afternoon).



PETER FISCHLI AND DAVID WEISS

Balancierende Stühle.

Color photograph.

15 ? x 11 ? in. (39.1 x 28.9 cm).

Executed 1984-1985.

This work is from the series *Stiller Nachmittag* (A Quiet Afternoon).

6 Comments

1. To me this is the stuff of discovery – no matter how personal it may be – I have to believe it nurtures the process. What a wonderful example. To begin to wonder is such an exciting prospect – who knows where it might lead. For that matter, to whom does it really matter?

Thanks for sharing this.

Comment by [Matt Niebuhr](#) – September 20, 2006 @ [10:34 pm](#)

2. Niépce and Fox Talbot were frustrated painters, too, so you're in good company.

Comment by [Todd W.](#) – September 21, 2006 @ [7:29 am](#)

3. Hi,

I think the third photograph of this post is a very cool one. I liked it so much and I just wanted to share this..

Maybe it is a good work by itself but I believe that the dog at the background, brings something extra into it.

Ciao.

Comment by [A. M. Eren](#) – September 21, 2006 @ [8:33 pm](#)

4. 'Photography, for me, is about the process. It is about wandering. Looking. Digging. The product is fine. It does its job stopping time. But mostly it is a charming reminder of the hunt'.

Yes I agree completely. Certainly the act of photographing- that part of being there- is, for me too, a crucial part of what makes Photography so involving.

I am, at the same time, always a little uncomfortable when I come to that other part of photography-that of producing small 2 dimensional representations of the world; these prints or digital images on a screen very often seem larger than life, better than life. Often I can't reconcile the reality and the representation. For me, quite often the 2 dimensional representation is a vast improvement on what's out there-from a compositional (colour, tone, space, mass etc) point of view.

I think it was the Impressionists who said something along the lines of 'Let nature be your master', referring to the importance of putting down on paper or canvas what is seen as is. Verisimilitude I suppose. I can go along with this to a degree in terms of truth equalling beauty.

The Impressionists did closely observe nature and the qualities of light. However the better exponents of the medium knew how to work with colour-they knew what comprised harmonious colour compositions. They understood balance. The painter has tremendous control of what is presented within the frame. So the Impressionists, whilst looking closely at nature, did clearly not just copy it. Modification came into the equation-muting colours, balancing the colour palette and creating more pleasing linear and spacial compositions.

With Photography, there is not so much control. That vivid green field against that vivid blue sky (nature) is not a harmonious colour composition. The painters would make it harmonious by muting the colours/changing the colours etc., etc.. Photographers of course can do this too in Photoshop. So my Point is I believe that photography and painting can very much improve on the reality artists use as source material. (In the context of Fine Art).

I read over at theOnlinePhotographer where Mike Johnston is having an exhibition of his colour photographs at the Guerrilla Gallery in Milwaukee. I used to make photographs in colour but, with

working in monochrome, the inherent colour problematic doesn't exist. Black and white photography is nothing more than colour abstraction. It simplifies and beautifies life's unwieldy, huge colour palette. If colour is used we must, in order to achieve a unified colour composition, include those colours which work well together. The actual colour of individual elements of the subject matter doesn't matter a jot. What matters is if the image has overall colour harmony. This is extremely difficult to achieve outside of a studio without resort to Photoshop to bring the elements into line.

In the case of your posting 'Photographing Sculpture', this is a twist on what I am referring too. I wonder is it akin to 'Photographing Photographs'. Would it be possible to make a photograph of a photograph better in some way? Thank you for a very thought-provoking blog and apologies for my ramble.

Best regards,

Greg Clements

Comment by [Greg Clements](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [12:36 am](#)

5. Hi Alec – let's see some of your "failed" paintings. Great blog BTW.

Guy Batey

Comment by [guybatey](#) — September 22, 2006 @ [6:00 am](#)

6. I've loved Andy Goldsworthy since I was in school, I have all his books piled up. There's just so much to admire about the guy's approach and attitude. I'd say philosophy but I suspect he wouldn't approve.

Finding that one of my favourite photographers has taken his portrait was like hearing Tom Waits would be providing music for a film written by Paul Auster.

Thanks for the cosmic convergence!

Comment by [miles](#) — January 7, 2007 @ [2:37 pm](#)