

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

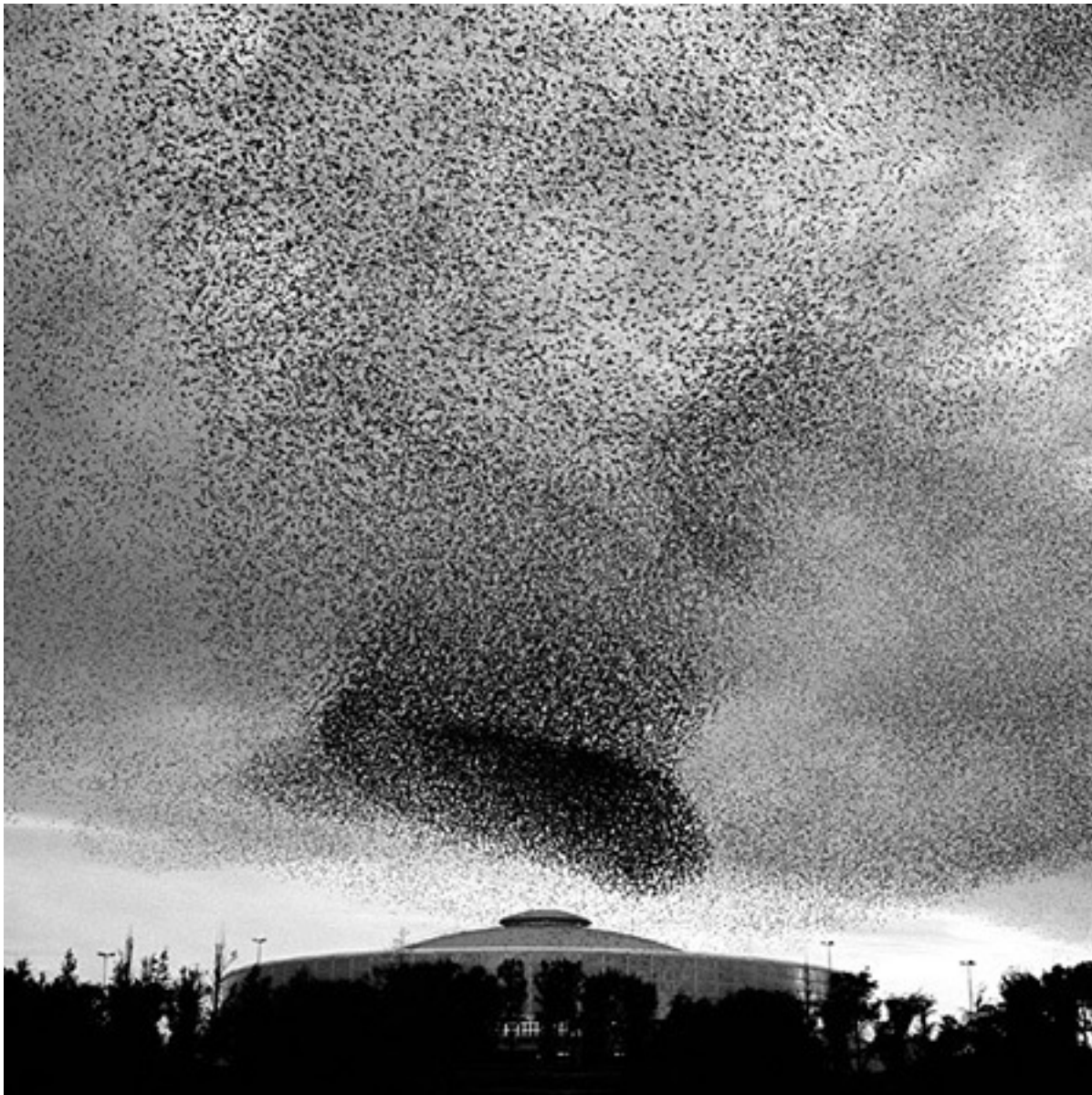
September 11, 2007

Richard Barnes

Filed under: artists, exhibitions (not mine), the sentence — alecsothblog @ 7:54 am

One of the best parts of my teaching gig at SFAI was bringing in visiting artists. Along with valuing what they could add to the class, this provided me with an excuse to hang out with some cool Bay Area artists.

The first person I invited, Richard Barnes, recently left San Francisco for the East Coast but was in town for a group exhibition at the Yurba Buena Center for the Arts. The show, *Dark Matters*, has a lot of fantastic work. But for me the highlight was seeing Barnes' pictures in person. These sumptuous images of starling migrations in Rome made a deep impression when I first saw them in the *New York Times Magazine* (pdf).



Mumur 1, Nov. 15, 2005 by Richard Barnes

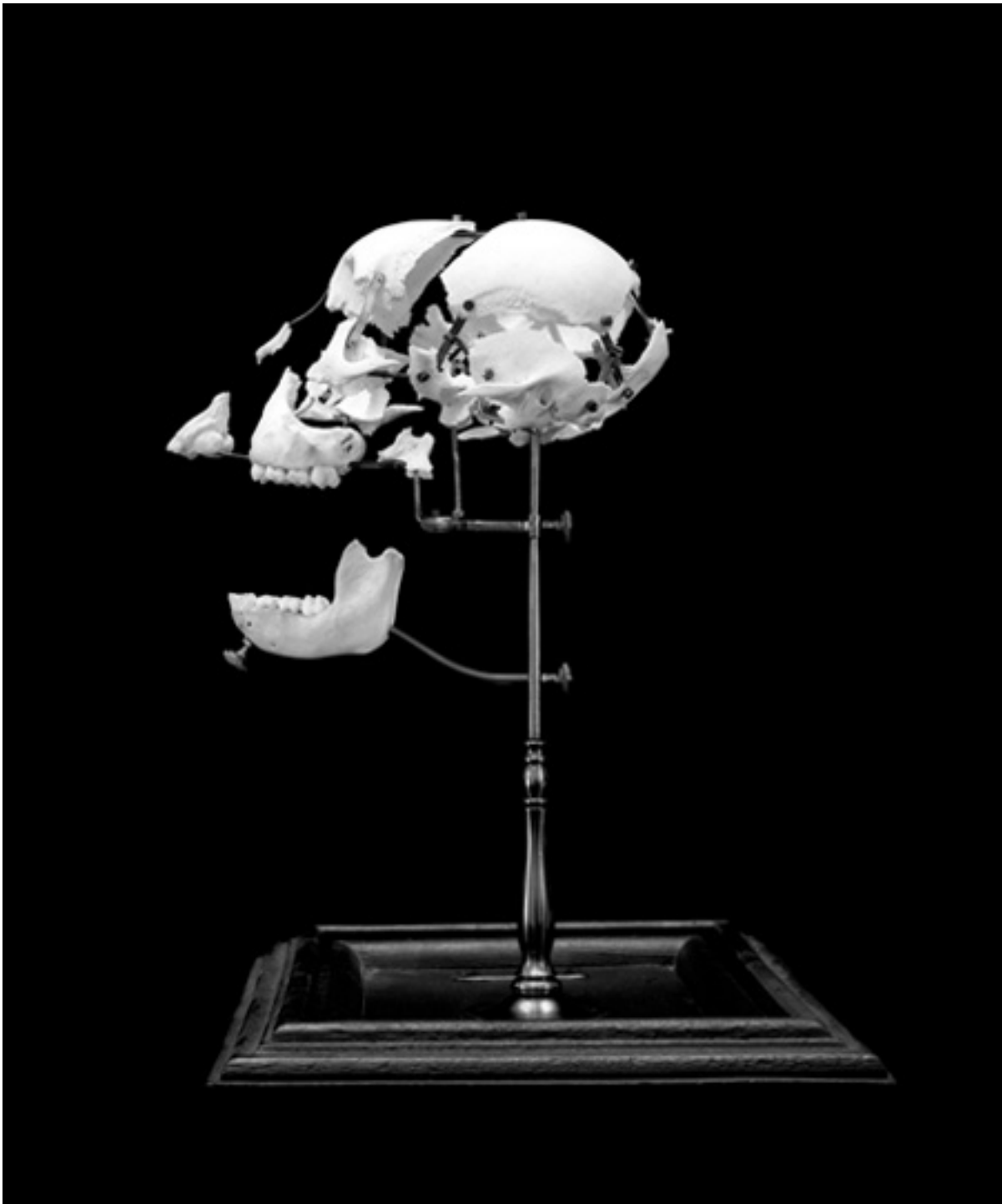
The Times has a nice interactive presentation of these pictures [here](#).

Not long ago Richard Barnes also did a series on bird nests:



from Grid of Nests, 2000, by Richard Barnes

But these bird photos are just the tip of Barnes' rich and eclectic career. One of the reasons I invited Richard to the class was because of his untraditional career path. After receiving a B.A from Berkeley, he has supported himself as a working photographer. This has principally been in the field of architectural photography, but along the way he has received numerous commissions. Much of this commissioned work deals with the architecture of preservation:



from *Animal Logic* by Richard Barnes



from Animal Logic by Richard Barnes

For all his great work with birds and museums, Barnes is best known for his pictures of a small house. Nearly ten years ago, the New York Times commissioned Barnes to photograph the cabin of Ted Kaczynski, aka the Unabomber. By mixing clinical minimalism with such loaded subject matter, Barnes created a frightening and iconic image that only gets more meaningful with time:



Unabomber Cabin (Sacramento), 1998, by Richard Barnes

As regular readers know, I have a fascination with 'the sentence' – the shorthand summation everyone uses to describe a particular person. Some are easy ("He's the guy that photographs Weimaraners). But Barnes is a tricky case. I doubt people would remember 'He's an architectural photographer who's done fine art projects on birds, museums and the Unabomber.' Whatever the phrase is, Barnes was able to sum up his achievements with a remarkably elegant sentence: "My work is all about containment." He went on to say that he'd only made this connection in the last few years.

For me this was the ultimate lesson that Barnes brought to the class. While it may not always be great marketing, artists should be free to explore whatever quickens their pulse. Over the long haul they will inevitably find a thread that unifies their vision. Finding this revelatory thread (and not the stupid 'sentence') seems to be one of the most meaningful experiences to come from a life making art.

- An exhibition of Richard Barnes' work will open on this Saturday, September 15th, at the Hosfelt Gallery in New York.

17 Comments

1. Starling migrations series reminded me of Crewdson's Fireflies. Likes Barnes's work. Where, online can i view more of it??.

Comment by Darren — September 11, 2007 @ 9:11 am

2. [...] alec soth – blog » Blog Archive » Richard Barnes The first person I invited, Richard Barnes, recently left San Francisco for the East Coast but was in town for a group exhibition at the Yurba Buena Center for the Arts. The show, Dark Matters, has a lot of fantastic work (tags: photography) [...]

Pingback by links for 2007-09-11 | TrentHead.Com — September 11, 2007 @ 9:24 am

3. Darren, click the links in the text above.

Comment by Alec Soth — September 11, 2007 @ 11:31 am

4. Unless the word "migration" has another sense in US birding than it does in the UK, these are not migrations — these are the roosting flocks that gather in immense numbers every winter evening over certain chosen spots (e.g. a railway station with an open roof or a reedbed) to put on jaw-dropping displays of synchronised flocking — thousands of birds acting as one pulsing organism. A truly awesome natural spectacle, which is sadly less common in the UK now, because of the dramatic decline in the starling population. In the 1980s I sometimes missed my train at Bristol Temple Meads station, waiting for the moment when the vast flock would — as one — drop like a stone and enter under the roof of the station to roost on the rafters.

Comment by Mike C. — September 11, 2007 @ 1:04 pm

5. Thanks, Alex

I've followed Barnes work with interest but indecision for years – especially the unabomber and birdsnest photos – and this bird series just opens up a whole new set of doors on his project.

It reminds me of the way Sugimoto's first seascape series swept away all the doubts I had about the diorama and movie palace photos. I really liked your note that it is not just us in the audience who get some things slower than others (we can't all be Alfred Barr walking into Jasper Johns first show at Leo Castelli) but artists who sometimes do not immediately appreciate the profundity of work they have made.

Comment by Marc Freidus — September 11, 2007 @ 7:48 pm

6. we have a print of one of Barnes's images in the office where I work and it sent chills up my spine when I first saw it. I'll never forget the time I saw the actual thing in Rome, back in 1996. it is one of the creepiest and most beautiful things I've ever seen. there's nothing quite like it. and it's really hard to get a sense from a photograph of the size of the flock. they almost look like a single giant creature when they move together in the sky. had I not been the only one stunned at the sight of it, I would have thought the devil himself was visiting Rome.

Comment by Red — September 11, 2007 @ 10:35 pm

7. For further insight into Barnes' admirable work see this '99 interview with John Paul Caponigro <http://www.johnpaulcaponigro.com/lib/artists/barnes.php>

Comment by danden — September 12, 2007 @ 12:12 am

8. The flock is stunning. It borders on surreal and I can only imagine what the print must look like.

Comment by Laurie — September 12, 2007 @ 8:59 am

9. great pictures. i like them all.

Comment by j zorn — September 12, 2007 @ 11:21 am

10. I believe that the last paragraph is the most sincere philosophy I have and will ever hear.

Comment by Shannon — September 12, 2007 @ 11:47 am

11. Bang, bang, bang! That is the sound of Alec hitting the nail on the head.

Finding the thread in my own work was a long process of almost 30 years. To understand that thread goes far beyond intellect and words. It is a purely emotional response to one's life and is what makes one's work authentic. It is much more than a style or technique. Images that spring from the thread are completely one's own.

The next best thing to finding your own thread, is to have others, whose work you admire, be able to see it also. Thank you Alec.

Comment by Mike Peters — September 12, 2007 @ 2:29 pm

12. from the Paul Caponigro interview:

RB: "I'm captivated by the idea of the existence of a past that refuses to depart completely, but instead lies buried, quietly insisting, interrupting the continuum of our collective present." Anyone interested in photography concerned with ideas like this could do a lot worse than read anything by W.G. Sebald, especially Austerlitz and Emigrants. His ideas on history and memory and the means of documenting these are more than worth the slightly depressing general effect of the books . .

Comment by Alex Edouard — September 13, 2007 @ 5:21 am

13. I think that the whole "thread" issue is really interesting. I dont have 30 years experience, only a few and its only in the last couple of years that i have started looking at exploring ideas, putting together images and thinking in terms of projects. I often toyed with the notion of having my images all fall under "one big idea" that represents what im about as a person and a photographer but never really knew if this was a good idea or not when starting out. I wasnt sure if it would limit me or drive me forward. Maybe its something one must be concious of but let the work evolve naturally and sooner or later that "thread" appears???

Comment by Darren — September 13, 2007 @ 4:28 pm

14. I can't stop thinking about that bear photo. The whole Animal Logic series is amazing.

And oh, the starlings. Between that and the Beth Dow work I posted about the other day, I'm dreaming in black and white.

I'm really looking forward to the Barnes show Saturday.

Comment by Jen Bekman — September 13, 2007 @ 8:41 pm

15. [...] This is an over-long preamble to something I've been thinking about a lot, namely the photos of Richard Barnes, posted by Mr. Alec Soth earlier this week. As I said over there in comments, I just can't stop thinking about that damn bear photo (above) and the entire Animal Logic series in general. [...]

Pingback by Personism » Blog Archive » We're Animals — September 14, 2007 @ 4:51 pm

16. [...] Josh wrote an interesting post today on Richard BarnesHere's a quick excerpt [...]

Pingback by [Spliceure.Com » Richard Barnes](#) — November 5, 2007 @ 12:03 am

17. "the architecture of preservation", seems to me, a pretty eloquent one-liner!

Comment by James Miller — November 21, 2007 @ 6:54 pm