

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 29, 2006

Underrated photographers

Filed under: [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 9:48 pm



Rochester N.Y., by Roger Mertin

My post on [Denis Cameron](#) and mention of [Bill Burke](#) brings up the subject of underappreciated photographers. In the [current issue](#) of American Photo, a dozen folks in the photo world were asked the question, "Whom do you classify as an underrated photographer, and why?"

I can understand Elliot Erwitt's reluctance to single out just one. He wrote:

There are so many fine photographers who are underrated that it would be unfair to name just one. Look at the New York Times, where the quality of photography has so leaped forward – these are not known photographers, they're just workaday photographers who take wonderful pictures. Recognition comes as a result of luck, timing and the situation at large.

Sam Abell mentioned a specific newspaper photographer I'd never heard of but am eager to learn more about: Pam Spaulding of the The Courier Journal in Louisville, KY. Does anyone know of images online from her thirty year project photographing a mom and her three kids?

Duane Michals only likes underrated photographers: "People who are 'rated' are people in the loop – trendy, hip," He writes, "the truly original people, like Arthur Tress and Chema Madoz, are underrated." He goes on to stir things up by saying, "Unless one brings imagination to observation, photography is simply reproducing reality. I like people who challenge reality, who don't reinforce banality."

I suspect Michals would hate my choice of Roger Merten.

Mark Klett seems to be saying that all fine-art photography is underrated relative to the culture at large:

Fine-art photography is a very small world associated with galleries, museums, and university art programs. It's not like rock music; the products of this world have never been widely seen because the artists are often exploring things that are not already coded in general consciousness. It's not that photographers don't want to be famous, it's just that very few of the views from the edges of culture make the mainstream. Ansel Adams was an exception.

45 Comments

1. Guess everyone has their favorite "underrateds." Four off the top of my head: Les Krims, the premier photographic surrealist; James Hamilton and Rene Gelpi, two extraordinary portraitists; and Toby Old, who documented the excesses of the late seventies.

Comment by [Stan Banos](#) — October 29, 2006 @ [11:58 pm](#)

2. Kosti Ruohomaa.

Comment by [Peter Holzhauer](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [12:07 am](#)

3. Chema Madoz isn't underrated, at least here in Spain. He is a wonderful and affordable person, he told me months ago that he is surprising because he can live doing the photos he likes from the late 70's. Here in Spain is a record.

Comment by [jesus](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [4:42 am](#)

4. I was just telling Christian Patterson, yesterday, that I think there are lots of great photographers! What we need are more great collectors for this work? Like the Dairy association promotes people to drink milk to build strong bones? There should be an ad campaign, promoting photography as a great medium of art to collect! I haven't figured out the practical punch line to collect, besides it's just nice to look at pictures! Wm.

Comment by [William Greiner](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [8:41 am](#)

5. Oh, my votes for under-rated: Clarence John Laughlin for the dead and Jim Dow for the living, consider these sub-categories. Wm.

Comment by [William Greiner](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [8:44 am](#)

6. I appreciate the mention of photographers from different venues...Both photojournalism and fine arts are separated so much in the "art" and "journalism" worlds. Many artists use the daily news world, not only as a paycheck, but an extension for practice and a useful to support their art habits on the sides

Comment by [Brandon Fields](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [10:52 am](#)

7. One of my votes would have to go to Judith Joy Ross. Bill Burke has already been mentioned—a personal favorite, and I may as well include Birney Imes. All three of these photographers, along with Nan Goldin, composed one of my favorite exhibits of all time—"Real Faces" at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris in NYC almost twenty years ago.

It's funny how things remain the same—from Max Kozloff's essay in the exhibit catalog: "As many portraits have lately shown, playacting has gained such dominance, at the expense of the player, that it seems utterly quaint and useless to wonder about who the person portrayed was or is...."Real Faces"...in this case means human faces that are looked at and attended to in a frank attempt to take their measure...it does not occur to the photographers to place themselves above or beneath the social status of their subjects—and this absence of presumption makes for freshness of contact and transparency of effect."

Comment by [David Kern](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [11:53 am](#)

8. Jitka Hanzlova, her book Rokytnik. Beautiful.

Comment by [stewart](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [4:11 pm](#)

9. I really like Roger Mertin, from what I've seen anyway. You know any more places I can find his work online?

Comment by [Nolan](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [6:18 pm](#)

10. Here are a couple of links:

http://www.geh.org/ne/mismi3/mertin_idx00001.html

<http://www.mcknightphoto.umn.edu/1999portfolios/mertin/mertin.html>

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [11:58 pm](#)

11. As Ted Hawkins says "you gotta know somebody who is somebody"

All fields have talented people who go unrecognized. To a degree you got to play the game. I can't see why if you've produced a body of work you wouldn't want to get it out there by any means necessary. What happens from there is chance....pretty much like everything else.

The problem that faces photography is, more than any other medium it -at a glance- can all look very similar. It's hard to make people look with fresh eyes, indeed hard to make different work.

Comment by [Paul](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [12:37 am](#)

12. I guess the women photographers who were working during that time have all received their due recognition since only one is included on this list, or can it be that women photographers are so under-rated they don't even make the under-rated list?

I know that the issue of the under-recognition of women is a tiresome one but it is also unbelievably tiresome to see lists like these again and again.

Comment by [Gabrielle de Montmollin](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [8:01 am](#)

13. The work of Jim Campbell <http://www.jimcampbell.tv/> is something I think about allot He has been around awhile He is somewhat known and I think always interesting and underatted – His works have a real unique presence

Comment by [Bill Sullivan](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [9:41 am](#)

14. Gabrielle brings up an interesting and maybe obvious point. I wasn't sure about posting my choice for an underated photographer (because she may not be so underated to some) but after Gabrielles comment I will give it up. Eve Sonneman's early diptych work is groundbreaking, she may be the first to explore the stereograph in a contemporary fashion. Viewing her work and her statements actually helped me to understand my own diptychs better. see some of her work @ <http://www.evesonneman.com/diptychs.html>

Comment by [Timothy](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [10:40 am](#)

15. 'Underrated' gets particularly complicated with the (partial) inclusion of photography in the contemporary art scene. Some photo artists make the leap into that sort of status/marketing niche (e.g. Nan Goldin), and many more do not, especially those who lack a ready-made conceptual handle for the Artforum readers in Chelsea. In the end, there's no making any sense of it. Some 'straight' photographers get mainstreamed as contemporary artists, and get the attendant exposure; others, inexplicably, don't.

Maybe it's a work in progress. Perhaps the gulf between the Miami Art Fair and AIPAD will close altogether at some point down the road.

Now that Peter Hujar doesn't qualify.... How about Stephen DiRado? One of the aforementioned artists who (for now) stands outside the inner sanctum exclusio of galleryworld. Lives and works in Worcester, a mid-career guy with a Nick Nixon pedigree and a similar interest in portraiture. Though, I'd argue (no offense intended to NN) DiRado achieves a far greater degree of intimacy with his seamless large-format technique.

Among his many, varied bodies of work (which include landscape), check out his dinner table pictures. The table as stage-set for the playing-out of assorted personal, familial, and romantic dramas, mostly nocturnal, and captured in terrific b&w contacts. He's underrated largely because his energy's gone into the work, rather than the career stuff. Hopefully, that will change.

Check it out- you'll be able to say 'I told you so.'

Comment by Tom Morrissey — October 31, 2006 @ [12:52 pm](#)

16. Shame on Elliot Erwitt for taking a "politically correct" path, and giving such a generalized, bland, puffy answer. I'm always amazed when artists are asked a question like that, and don't take the opportunity to acknowledge the quality work of one of their peers.

For underappreciated photographers..I agree with most listed already, and how about.. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, David Wojnarowicz, Aaron Siskind, and Victor Skrebneski ? I'm always shocked how unknown they all are in most circles of american media.

But, art photography has come a long way.. and, I'd dare to suggest, for the first time in photo history there's a few color contemporary photographers that are even well over-appreciated!!

Comment by [Mike @ MAO](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [2:41 pm](#)

17. Although his statement is relevant, I wish someone like Elliot Erwitt would just drop a few names. What does he have to lose by saying "I like....." maybe the rest of us would find something new. I haven't read the article so I can only comment on the quote which Alec posted.

Someone already mentioned Birney Imes so I would add a photographer from Munich named Zoltan Jokay and Nigel Shafran from Britain, who is well known in some circles so I guess it comes down to what Mark Klett said about success and fame in the photo-art world being relative, an almost "glass-house" phenomenon. Ask anyone on the street in middle America to name a famous photographer and 8 out of 10 times you will hear Anne Geddes.

Did Mark mention anyone?

Comment by [Andrew Phelps](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [5:04 pm](#)

18. For Gabrielle- Rineke Dijkstra, Jitka Hanzlova, Hellen van Meene, Uta Barth, Annelies Strba, Sally Mann, Terri Weifenbach, Rinko Kawauchi.

Comment by [rg](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [5:56 pm](#)

19. Ouch.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [6:29 pm](#)

20. How about Austrian, Paul Kranzler?

Have a look at 'Land of Milk & Honey'
<http://www.paulkranzler.com>

Comment by [Tadhg](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [6:44 pm](#)

21. Thank you rg. Also, Bettina Rheims, Elsa Dorfman, Lisette Model, Olivia Parker, Ruth Thorne-Thomsen ...

Comment by [Gabrielle de Montmollin](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [8:00 pm](#)

22. [...] alec soth – blog photographica, miscellanea, etcetera « Underrated photographers [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » JoAnn Verburg](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [10:22 pm](#)

23. Marketa Luskacova. Her book (ISBN 8072151290) has to be one of the most beautiful photobook bargains currently available.

Comment by [Mike C.](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [6:45 am](#)

24. Are you kidding?
Bettina Rheims, Rineke Dijkstra, Jitka Hanzlova, Hellen van Meene, Uta Barth, Annelies Strba, Sally Mann?

Just because they're women doesn't mean they're underrated Rheims, Dijkstra and Mann are SUPER hot and will be for along time. van Meene and Hanzlova are getting their due now. Whie I loved the article, i didn't agree that Philip Jones Griffith is underrated. War photographer like him and Don McCullin were products of their time. Griffiths died in Vietnam, but his name always comes up when you speak of VN-era photogs. Guys like McCullin are the ones I'm facinated with. After being #\$\$@ed by the brits and not being allowed to cover the Fauklands war, Don retired to his estate to take landscape pics. Guys like James Natchway stuck around and continue to churn out awesome work.

I agree with the guy above that it's "who you know" serioulsy, a word from artists like Alec or Grannan would make any gallery director look twice at a website or body of work. And that's just the way it is!

in the end, I think most of modern photogs will be forgotten in the Internet morass.

Comment by [imgiordano](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [10:34 am](#)

25. I will second Tom M.'s statement about DiRado and add: a number of years ago A. D. Coleman in one of his many columns in the NYT wrote about the "in the know art world" pandering only to the cutting edge, the show me "something new" group. And at the same time overlooking those who continue to work quietly and diligently, but making profound and poignant visual statements all the same. I believe that Coleman referred to this group of artist as "the walking dead of photography." This is Stephen DiRado, especially not only the aforementioned "dinner table series," but look further into his early "Bell Pond" images, his "Beach People" (a twenty year long love affair with the people that come year- after-year to a clothing optional beach, his JUMP series of images of people literally jumping from a high bridge — that moment when they let go and gravity takes over (to the shown this winter at the DeCordova Museum), and lastly through a series of ongoing portarits of his father suffering through the stages of Alzheimer's. <http://www.stephendirado.com>

Comment by [Frank Armstrong](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [2:42 pm](#)

26. Might be fun, if a little evil, to do a 'most overrated'.

Comment by Tom Morrissey — November 1, 2006 @ [3:59 pm](#)

27. Let's stay away from 'most overrated.' It has 'pot kettle black' written all over it.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 1, 2006 @ [5:18 pm](#)

28. henry wessel

Comment by kris — November 2, 2006 @ [8:17 am](#)

29. yes, i think Clarence John Laughlin is underappreciated. i like a quote of his: "I especially want made clear that I am an extreme romanticist – and don't want to be presented as some kind of goddamned up-to-the-minute version of a semi-abstract photographer."

Comment by j zorn — November 2, 2006 @ [12:11 pm](#)

30. mark steinmetz
mark steinmetz
mark steinmetz

Comment by [Dan](#) — November 2, 2006 @ [3:02 pm](#)

31. On more of an undervalued vibe, you can always get Thomas Roma's books for about a dollar on Amazon marketplace. Sicilian Passage for \$1 is shocking value for money.

Comment by burke — November 3, 2006 @ [7:53 am](#)

32. Alec,

Do you think photographers who are "rated" should help those that are historically "underrated" as was the case with Berenice Abbott and Atget? I mean think about were street photography would be without the influence of Atget. Here in Baltimore, I'm trying to collect negatives of a Aubrey Bodine-type man whose been shooting since the 1940s. It would be ashame to lose all that history, as would happen if established photogs didn't help out the forgotten and "underrated"

Comment by [jmgiorano](#) — November 3, 2006 @ [12:39 pm](#)

33. Interesting choices and I certainly agree with the inclusion of Marketa Luskacova. In addition to her current bargain-priced book, you might do well to go to the source and check out her two earlier books, Pilgrims and Photographs of Spitalfields. On a side note, Philip Jones Griffiths survived Vietnam and is very much alive.

Comment by Chas — November 5, 2006 @ [2:00 am](#)

34. trent parke and his emotions

Comment by kris — November 5, 2006 @ [9:22 am](#)

35. YIKES! Sorry PJG....I meant Larry Burrows.....ummm....does face egg always taste this bitter?

Comment by [jmgiorano](#) — November 6, 2006 @ [11:59 am](#)

36. I've recently become fascinated by 19th century photographers Felix Teynard, Maxime Du Camp (who's primarily known as an author), and Desire Charnay.

Unfortunately, most photographers were/are underrated.

Comment by Jeff — November 6, 2006 @ [7:17 pm](#)

37. [...] Until last week I wasn't familiar with Stephen DiRado. A couple of folks had mentioned his name in regards to the discussion of underrated photographers. I looked up his website and was bowled over. While I don't claim to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the medium, it is inconceivable that work of this quality and consistency hadn't penetrated my consciousness sooner. Had I just spaced out or is Stephen DiRado the most underrated photographer in America? Within fifteen minutes of seeing his website I emailed Stephen in hopes of answering this and other questions regarding his remarkable work. Stephen responded with the same generosity of spirit that you can see in his pictures. [...]

Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » Stephen DiRado](#) — November 6, 2006 @ [8:56 pm](#)

38. i've got to agree with the hank wessel comment.

interesting that he and tod papageorge aren't that dissimilar and papageorge seems to be sort of coming out of the woodworks in nyc while wessel is having a retrospective at sfmoma in the next few months.

Comment by mark — December 3, 2006 @ [12:50 pm](#)

39. [...] Read more: here [...]

Pingback by [Underrated photographers :: Newstack](#) — December 3, 2006 @ [1:43 pm](#)

40. Although she was much published in the 1960s and 1970s, I can't get enough of Evelyn Hofer's work, especially the portraits in her great books from the 1960s about the cities of Washington, Dublin, New York, and London. And her portrait of Balthus and his wife just knocks my socks off.

Comment by [Walter Dufresne](#) — December 14, 2006 @ [4:25 pm](#)

41. I'm not sure any of the above are under-rated. Underrated by whom? Certainly not your correspondents. Personally I think that the art establishment underrates most documentary photography, in fact anyone who calls themselves a photographer.

I notice Marketa Luskacova is mentioned a few times above. (Did you know she used to be a Magnum Photographer?) It's not that she is underrated, it's just that she is a shy and undemanding person who concentrates on her work to the detriment of her career!

A lot of people above seem to be using underrated as meaning forgotten, unknown, or unsuccessful. Interestingly, I actually think that Martin Parr is highly underrated, his ubiquity and large out-put lead to a complacency, but his works are more influential and interesting than, for example, Gilbert and George, but you can buy his work for a few thousand dollars.

That's my hot investment tip!

Interesting visiting you blog.

NB

Comment by Neil Burgess — March 15, 2007 @ [7:05 am](#)

42. Roger Merten is truly under rated, i was fortunate to study with him during my time at the Visual studies Workshop in the mid 70's and as far as i can see there is no source that even comes close to representing the complexity and depth of his work, i was living / working in russia until 2003 and only found out about his untimely death a year ago so if anyone knows where more of his work can be seen i would love to know.

Comment by [Peter Blakely](#) — September 25, 2007 @ [12:45 pm](#)

43. sure, i know it's late...

you're spot-on mr. dufresne!
evelyn hofer is brilliant. when i came across her, i was truly touched, and i more than a little ticked off that she was never brought to my attention in school. although she is probably less underrated than under recognized. she's one of my inspirations.

Comment by [JeffreyPrehn](#) — November 19, 2007 @ [5:13 pm](#)

44. "in the end, I think most of modern photogs will be forgotten in the Internet morass."

At 6 billion people, the world already has quite a number of forgotten people.. with a population of 9 billion, even more will be forgotten. Social connections will continue to simplify the picture for the gatekeepers of the so-called art world.

-Chris

Comment by [Chris Thompson](#) — January 19, 2008 @ [2:13 pm](#)

45. I came across this website whilst trying to track down Marketa Luskacova. I was deeply troubled to learn that Philip Jones Griffiths had been killed in Vietnam, not least because I had been introduced to him a couple of years ago at a gallery opening. But I would also agree that Marketa Luskacova is one of Europe's great underrated or rather, under-recognised photographers. Her work in the East End of London stands as one of the great urban photography narratives and demonstrates the involvement, ethnographic evocation and creative passion, so often missing from the canon of urban photography, driven as it so often is, by poorly articulated and self-referencing cultural theory. I think that her work will be remembered long after the cultural commentators, museologists and gallery amateurs have retired to their piles in Tuscany.

Comment by [Paul Halliday](#) — January 30, 2008 @ [7:56 am](#)