

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 10, 2007

Ted Hartwell, 1933-2007

Filed under: [critics & curators](#), [psa](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:10 pm



Ted Hartwell by Dan Dennehy, 2002

I worked for seven years at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts doing darkroom work and digital archiving. Now and then the photography curator Ted Hartwell would pop his head into our studio. I think he missed the smell of the darkroom. Ted started working in the same studio in 1962. Like nearly all museums of that time, the MIA

didn't have a curator of photography. So Ted did double duty and started putting together small shows. By the time he officially became curator of photography in 1972, he'd mounted major exhibitions and developed the foundation for a world-class photography collection.

I loved Ted's visits to our studio. Where else in Minneapolis could I talk to a guy who hung out with Richard Avedon and Henri Cartier-Bresson? Despite traveling in those circles, Ted was utterly approachable. For all of his curatorial achievements, he was still doing double duty – he still loved the life of photography: making pictures, hanging out, chewing the fat about the new Nikon.

Like Ted, I eventually graduated from the old studio to larger pastures. He showed me love and encouragement every step of the way. Last year he led a MIA group to my studio. He spoke about me with almost parental pride:



Ted Hartwell at Soth Studio, 2006 by Greg Jansen

A proper obituary for Ted should talk about his incredible achievements. But right now I can only talk about the man. Ted Hartwell was a good, good man. He will be greatly missed.

- Read the Star Tribune obituary [here](#).
- Mary Virginia Swanson's tribute [here](#).

19 Comments

1.

Ted Hartwell, 1987, photo by Erich Hartmann/Magnum Photos

Comment by Alec Soth — July 10, 2007 @ 10:59 pm

2. I'm very sorry for your loss.

This has certainly been a rough week or so for photography, I guess. The pictures along the way have been beautiful, though. I live in Chicago, and after seeing some of Szarkowski's prints, I'm reminded of him every time I pass by a Sullivan building or go to the Loop. it's amazing how broad these mens' legacies can be.

and, by the way, i love that first picture of mr. hartwell by dan dennehy: it's simply fantastic!

Best regards.

Comment by Meica. — July 11, 2007 @ 12:48 am

3. After all these year, he can still strike a boyish pose with his camera.

Comment by Teddy — July 11, 2007 @ 5:26 am

4. Ted was indeed a good, good man. I first met him when I ran my ow custom b&w lab. I was delivering negs to a client doing fashion work and Ted was there because the gal he was dating at the time was a model. I had no idea who he was but we hit it off splendidly, and been friends since that day.

Ted was special. Always approachable, always willing to help, always eager to introduce people to each other. I always bitched and moaned that he didn't concentrate enough on local artists but that was a minor quibble. I loved the man and what he accomplished.

I'm sorry to say I never made a single image of Ted that makes me happy. The last exposure of him I made is linked to my name.

Comment by Michal Daniel — July 11, 2007 @ 6:41 am

5. A great picture of Ted by Kerri Pickett here.

Comment by Alec Soth — July 11, 2007 @ 9:43 am

6. The funny thing with John Szarkowski or Ted for that matter, is that they were around so long that my story is everyone's story...the Ted story is simple: "I went into his office to get a piece of gum- a pencil - ask a simple question, and I emerged three hours later, only because I had to go, not because I wanted to, because he knew everyone, and had so much to share, and he was always eager for an eager ear to share it with." It's not just my Ted story though. It's everyone's.

I worked for Swan in Tucson, and when I decided to come here for grad school. She made a business trip around it to help me find an apartment. Of course, she also took me right over to the Institute. The Photography Department was up by the gallery back then, like some grand and wondrous renegade photographers' squatter village with lots of space and photography playground right next door. And I'm pretty damn sure, that like any good renegade photographers' squatter village, Ted was smoking-right there in the museum. Shhh.

Comment by Colleen Mullins — July 11, 2007 @ 10:40 am

7. I am terribly shocked to hear the news about Ted...
I met him seven years ago when I used to live in Minneapolis..
He supported me so much when I told him that I am coming to New York City..
He was so warm hearted special person all the time...
I know he has three little boys... I hope they are fine... Too sad to hear this news..

Comment by Yayoi Sawada — July 11, 2007 @ 3:25 pm

8. I did not know Ted that well but I do know one thing and that is — 'Only the good die young!' I remember Ted as a very quiet little boy with a wry sense of humor and a feeling of him being a great guy to hang with. Where indeed does the time go? The two gentleman, John Szarkowski and Ted came to visit and made us better for what they brought to the table. Their leaving us — is and will always be too raw and too soon.

Eli Reed

Comment by Eli Reed — July 11, 2007 @ 5:42 pm

9. I am very sad that Ted is not here in body anymore – but his spirit is still here. I grew up in Mpls and used to go to the MIA galleries on the weekends. I saw one of Ted's "basement" shows – and it made a big impression on me. I'm not sure what show it was – seemed like it might have been *Toward a Social Landscape* from the Eastman House – but I never forgot the Garry Winogrand photo of the overturned tricycle in the driveway of the house on the edge of the desert! I never met Ted at that time. I later went to the Avedon opening and remember the woman with the twins lens camera who I thought was really out of place – I didn't know until later it was Diane Arbus. Later while in school at VSW in Rochester I did graduate work on Avedon and that is when I got to know Ted and visit with him. He became one of my advisors. I will miss how he showed up every year in New York for AIPAD and other confs. or photo fairs and how we always exchanged our latest news. I am just so glad he accomplished what he did – which we will always have. Especially the Avedon show which is one of the most incredible photo exhibition and a great coup for Ted and Mpls at a time when all the big shows were on east and west coasts.

Comment by Robert Stevens — July 11, 2007 @ 7:54 pm

10. Alec, Thanks for the mention of the link which you must have seen on Swan's site. The photo is not as good as Dan's amazing picture, but I think it reveals a bit of Ted's curiosity. I had just gotten a new point and shoot and Ted was looking at the camera trying to figure out what it was as no small detail passed him by... I also like that it shows his new office so well.

I was in the MIA the other day and saw your big photographs in the permanent collection and it is clear that he was very proud of you and your work.

Minnesota was so fortunate to have hosted so many great exhibitions such as the Avedon show (which was before my time but the stories still fly like it was yesterday), the Magnum show, the Bresson show, the Bischof show etc. I wonder if we see as much reportage photography at the MIA in the future?

Mostly it was always good to see Ted as he was indeed a good man, friend to photographers and an informed and experienced asset to photography in general. It is sad he died so young and that he left such young children is very sad.

Comment by Keri Pickett — July 12, 2007 @ 8:49 am

11. I had the honor of knowing Ted during my time working at the Weinstein Gallery. He was always so kind and genuine and came to every opening. What I'll remember most is the sound of his

voice as he sat in our "guest" chair in the gallery. He told rich stories of his interactions with photographers, who, with his support, became America's greats.

My heart goes out to his family. He will be missed on so many levels.

Comment by Lisa Elder — July 12, 2007 @ 4:54 pm

12. Here is a video sketch of the late photographer Robert Wilcox as described by the now late Ted Hartwell: <http://www.mnstories.com>

Comment by Michal Daniel — July 13, 2007 @ 10:15 am

13. I don't think that I can think of photography in any relation to my life, without thinking of Ted Hartwell at the same time.

Not long after Ted officially became the curator of photography at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, he showed up at our Wisconsin farm, where I'd started the Country Photography Workshop in a barn. That's when we first met in person, though I'd earlier driven up from Chicago to see the Avedon exhibit.

He rode in on a Honda 750 4-cylinder motorcycle, a very hot bike at the time, which immediately impressed me because he was so low-key in contrast. Thinking about it now, it seems like the same kind of "right fit" that many of us used to feel about the cameras we chose to hold and use.

Ted was the right fit for the job, for the times, for the artists and others in the photography community that he brought together with each other in the long-running experimental environment that seemed based on the idea, "what could happen if these and those and that and this kind of meet and cross-influence each other?" He was, as we say today, "all about" possibilities, not certainties. What was certain for him seemed to be that possibilities are certain, and that's worth a lot.

When we were looking for a new landing place for the workshop, and were considering Minneapolis, Ted arranged a meeting in his office with, as I recall, Jim Dozier and Rick from Film in the Cities, Stuart Klipper, and a few other folks I'm sure I'm overlooking. (I wore a museum-appropriate T-shirt with an anonymous artist's collage of Hokusai's "Great Tidal Wave" and Hopper's "Nighthawks" – the wave was crashing through the restaurant window.) The welcome feeling from meeting that group was one of the keys to our deciding to come here and reopen the workshop as Lightworks.

Ted opened his office for us to bring our workshop students and the world-class photographers who led their master classes, just so "something might happen, something a museum might not be expected to do, or to be like, something they might remember finding here."

There's no way to say "thanks" enough, but "thanks, Ted."

Comment by Peter Gold — July 13, 2007 @ 1:52 pm

14. The last show Ted curated opens tonite, see you there: http://www.artsmia.org/press/view.cfm?PR_ID=148

Comment by Michal Daniel — July 13, 2007 @ 4:55 pm

15. Ted Hartwell, you will be missed by so many, I write this blog site because I do not know how to reach you, I feel such a sense of loss. I have a print that Ted took of two of his precious children when they were just born, the twins, we would often swap stories about night interruptions when children needed comforting and care. He told me that he would sometimes lay by the twins and give them their little waters and change their little diapers. He was so proud of his children, and he took the most beautiful photos of them, he never stopped documenting what was most

important to him in his life. He was always excited about the people who did the photography, so many stories. I will miss your stories Ted.

Comment by Donna Kelly — July 14, 2007 @ 12:53 am

16. Dear Alec —

Thank you for the elegant elegy and blog on Ted Hartwell.

He was an inspiration for the rest of us in the curatorial profession. In the course of doing his job so very well he also defended what was true, warmed many hearts, expanded many minds, lifted many spirits, and spread an abundant amount of laughter and joy as well. What a model for us all!

In the passage of his life through ours he made a real difference. Thank you, Ted.

— Roy

Comment by Roy Flukinger — July 18, 2007 @ 12:20 pm

17. I still recall the feeling of walking up Nicolet Mall on a muggy day in July after Ted purchased a group of my photos. It was exhilarating—I'd been validated and encouraged to press on. Thanks Ted.

Comment by Robert Holmgren — July 19, 2007 @ 4:14 pm

18. Just wanted to add my simple memories of Ted. I started at the MIA as a fresh kid out of college in 1977. Ted was one of the most generous individuals on the team. Over my 8 years with the museum, Ted always played an important role in my education and growth as a young arts administrator. His leather pants, always present camera, and wonderful smile will be what I remember most. He was a pioneer as everyone knows, he was also one of the kindest guys I have ever worked with.

Comment by Bob Booker — August 5, 2007 @ 9:58 pm

19. Ted was an insider who made things accessible for the public. For me, an arts journalist in the 80s and 90s, Ted was an invaluable source and always a pleasure to interview. He invited me in to his galleries and office, where his love for the work just shone out of him. His personal sweetness and warmth made him the perfect ambassador for photography.

What a dear man, and what a lovely life.

Comment by Diane Hellekson — August 29, 2007 @ 12:04 pm