

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

October 29, 2006

Photobook essays

Filed under: [books, critics & curators](#) — alecsothblog @ 9:26 pm

Today's New York Times Book Review praises new books by [Patricia Hampl](#) and [Richard Ford](#). I'm lucky to have had both authors write for me. I know that most photo book enthusiasts skip these essays. But I assure you these pieces are worthwhile. Taking a cue from Raymond Carver's essay in [Bill Burke's Portraits](#), I urged the authors to refrain from specifically addressing my work or even mentioning my name. Can anyone think of other photo book essays that serve to enlarge the work rather than explain it?

(P.S. Maybe [Holly Myers](#) should look at [Bill Burke](#)).

11 Comments

1. I think the inclusion of writer Jessica Hagedorn's work in the book Dawoud Bey: Portraits 1975-1995 is a very provocative choice. The writing starts off as a response to one of Bey's photographs, then transforms into a poetic reflection on Hagedorn's own family portraits. Granted there are other essays in this book that do a great job of specifically explaining Bey's career, work, and thought process, but the Hagedorn piece in the middle of the book is an unadvertised special which led me down a dreamy tangent, yet still complemented the photographs.

Comment by [Jason Reblando](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [12:34 am](#)

2. All the essays in Nadav Kander's 'Beauty's Nothing'. They enhance the mood he wants to evoke with the images very well, they almost create a movie-like narrative and flow together with the photographs.

Comment by [lodewijk](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [1:22 am](#)

3. I've always enjoyed the essay in Sally Mann's "Immediate Family" by Reynolds Price. His writing always fills me with a tinge of regret and nostalgia for days long past, days of seeming innocence but actually fraught with the messiness of raw emotion and mortality. This particular essay points out the ability of photography to point out not only what we had but what we've lost and reaffirms the importance of the image as a little treasure from the past. This is a sentiment I cherish especially in the image-swamped world I find myself in today.

Will future generations have too much information and imagery from today? Will it destroy the aura of the past? The church down the street from me is closing after being in existence for over 100 years. I was there yesterday looking over photos from its history and it was such a profound experience. I didn't have a clue as to who any of these people in these photos were but I was left wanting to know so much more about them and what kind of lives they led—who they were, what they felt—how rich their lives were. I was left wanting more—and it was this that was left unsaid by the photos that was so moving for me.

Comment by [David Kern](#) — October 30, 2006 @ [11:39 am](#)

4. I'd like to add Jack Hitt's essay in Tim Davis's My Life in Politics.

Comment by [Observer](#) — October 31, 2006 @ [1:30 am](#)

5. If one deals with its absolutely over-the-top quality, there's Michel Houellebecq's essay in Thomas Ruff's Nudes.

Comment by Tom Morrissey — October 31, 2006 @ [12:57 pm](#)

6. Richard Ford's the perfect guy to write about your work. A great writer, and a cool dude, or at least that's my impression.... I've been holding off on buying 'Niagara', but with Ford coming to town to read from his new novel- maybe I'll have him sign that, too...

Comment by Tom Morrissey — October 31, 2006 @ [1:04 pm](#)

7. Somehow, I think we all missed the obvious; Jack Kerouac for Robert Frank's "The American's." He still speaks about the work, and in some great detail, but I've always enjoyed reading it and as a part of the book. Kerouac's words have always been exciting, and the narratives formed by the photographs spurn wild imagingatve tales setting a distinct and proper mood for the work at hand.

I did always really like Kerouac anyway, though, so I wasn't hard to impress.
Still, you should all check it out.

Comment by meica. — November 1, 2006 @ [9:23 pm](#)

8. I really enjoyed Gerry Badger's essay in Jem Southams book "Landscape Stories".

Comment by Ed — November 1, 2006 @ [9:36 pm](#)

9. James Agee in Helen Levitt's A Way of Seeing.

Szarkowski's intro to Eggleston's Guide does some 'explaining', but also a huge amount of enlargement, if that's the word, for readers at the time.

Comment by rg — November 2, 2006 @ [3:47 am](#)

10. Nothing Personal, photos by Richard Avedon text by James Baldwin. They went to school together.
I know this is somewhat late to mention this.

Comment by Amy de Wit — February 27, 2007 @ [8:11 pm](#)

11. On the flip side..... Walker Evans great photographic introductory essay to Agee's Now Let Us Praise famous Men..... and in relation to the post on titles.... It is hard to think of a better one (in my humble and often misguided) opinion.

Cheers from Australia.

Comment by Sean — July 23, 2007 @ [7:43 am](#)