

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 14, 2006

More on amateurs

Filed under: [photographs \(mine\)](#), [vernacular & Flickr](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:04 am

[Mark Sullo](#) sent me a link to a terrific site called [Square America](#). I particularly enjoyed [A Brief Essay of Love](#):



In his email, Mark wrote: "I used to collect these vernacular photos a ways back and often thought they were so beautiful and expressive that I almost had to stop doing photography myself."

In a reply to my recent post, [Professional vs. Amateur](#), [salishpark](#) writes: "I'm an amateur because no one will pay for my pictures but also I've read that if you look at the original etymology of that word being an amateur means engaging in an art (or a study or sport) with the primary motivation of love or passion for the activity, as opposed to money. Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'Every artist was first an amateur.'"

I took this picture back when there was no doubt that I was an amateur:



Bill, 1995 © Alec Soth

6 Comments

1. What I really love about vernacular photographs or snapshots, is the element of innocence. That they're seemingly done by people who know little or nothing about things like composition or timing or tone... and yet they're so remarkable that they're turning up everywhere on the web after having been discarded and forgotten.

Now amateur versus pro, and the ability to make your way doing what you love... that's a gift and often a mysterious dividing line...

If that guy didn't have a name tag on I'd guess... Don Rickles>

Comment by [Mark S](#) — September 14, 2006 @ [2:02 am](#)

2. – I think we can appreciate vernacular photographs for many things, their presence and at the same time they offer nostalgia. Nostalgia is not qualities of objects; it's responses of subjects-active, emotionally- and intellectually-engaged subjects; we see those images as holding an emblematic aesthetic. And really it's because of their age. And our photographs of today will also be nostalgic one day and bring out these complex suggestions of reminiscence, melancholy and yearning. even homesickness, authenticity and irony.

Pro versus amateur > Salishpark said it !!
(sorry my bad english)
ciao zoe

Comment by [zoe](#) — September 14, 2006 @ [4:27 pm](#)

3. On appreciation for vernacular photos:

A few years ago I had my car broken into. The thieves stole everything: a bookbag with textbooks, my stereo, cd's, two years worth of sketchbooks and they ripped the center console out which contained about ten dollars in change, a season's pass at the local ski resort and a photo with rounded corners of me, 2 years old, sitting on my grandparents' lap. They left the photo on the passenger's seat.

Comment by [Steve](#) — September 14, 2006 @ [4:56 pm](#)

4. That story made my day. Thanks Steve.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — September 14, 2006 @ [5:02 pm](#)

5. I agree with Zoe. I think it was first Susan Sontag in 'On Photography' to suggest that photography actively promotes nostalgia by evoking a subject which is absent, in a physical form that can be fetishized. Probably vernacular photography multiplies the effect by reminding one's childhood or youth by adding the element of close family; like in [this picture](#), which is absorbing even when you are looking at someone else's family photo.

Actually, I guess a striking comparison can be made between two photos above. They both feature couples dancing, but they probably can't be more different from each other. A balanced, to the point composition versus snapshot aesthetics plus degrading effect of time on photo paper. Regardless of its source, I think there are artistic opportunities in this emotional power of vernacular images waiting to be explored.

Comment by [taylan](#) — September 15, 2006 @ [3:33 am](#)

6. Snapshots are proof of what I have always claimed: Subjects create impact, not technical excellence. If I'm lucky, I will stay an amateur for the rest of my life.

Comment by [Svein-Frode](#) — September 15, 2006 @ [5:29 am](#)