

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

December 21, 2006

Humiliation + Sexual Selection = Art

Filed under: [aesthetics](#), [snow](#) — alecsothblog @ 12:52 am

You've seen the snow pictures and the charts diagramming science and poetry, and now you are asking yourself, "What motivates these geeks?"

I have an answer. Actually, the world's preeminent geek-turned-rock star has an answer. On [his blog](#), David Byrne has a terrific post about art as a form of sexual selection:

Art, amongst other pursuits, is, according to this idea, one of a number of gauges of deeper fitness, creativity and skill. The maker may have genetic fitness not immediately apparent, especially given the fact that the typical creative person's uniform is not a power suit. If he or she can afford to expend mucho time and energy on aesthetic pursuits, for example, the person must be doing O.K. in order to be able to "waste" such time and effort. That is, they have time and energy left over from basic survival.

I'd make a joke here about doing all of this for Cat Power, but my wife isn't finding [those jokes](#) funny anymore. Instead I'll link to [this article](#) where Cat Power talks about her humiliating photo shoot with Avedon:

I was so drunk I could barely stand up. My organs were so messed up from drinking I was in physical pain. I couldn't zip up my pants because my stomach was killing me. I didn't even realize I wasn't wearing underwear until the magazine came out. I had to explain to my grandmother that this was the definitive photographer of the 20th century. (see the picture [here](#)).

Speaking of Avedon, he took one of my all-time favorite snow pictures:



W.H Auden, 1960

When Auden was an undergraduate at Oxford, he was close friends with the poet Stephen Spender. Spender was insecure about his writing talent. 'Do you really think I'm any good,' he asked Auden. 'Of course,' Auden replied. 'But why?' 'Because you are so infinitely capable of being humiliated. Art is born of humiliation.'

4 Comments

1. *Art is born of humiliation.*

A couple years ago we were kicking the "what is art?" thing around in an epistemology class. The best we could come up with is (paraphrased, natch) "Something you do where your stake in the aesthetics are important enough that you're willing to risk damage to your ego to get someone else to see it."

Auden, of course, was more succinct.

Comment by [Clint](#) — December 21, 2006 @ [1:08 pm](#)

2. Hey Alec, ever read anything about Bowerbirds?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bowerbird>

They are known for expending tons of energy in the creation of "displays" that attract mates. And there is some kind of asthetics to what they are doing. Pretty interesting...

Comment by [ryan](#) — December 21, 2006 @ [1:51 pm](#)

3. I have come to the conclusion that photography/image making is quite alot like sex, it is the intersection of what you are interested in and what you can get.

Comment by [Ron Diorio](#) — December 22, 2006 @ [5:52 am](#)

4. Ron, what you just said was brilliant.

Comment by [Noah](#) — December 22, 2006 @ [11:35 pm](#)