

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

June 12, 2007

Erotic baseball photography

Filed under: [baseball](#) — alecsothblog @ 10:29 pm



Kent Wallace, pitcher, Oneonta Yankees, Oneonta, New York, 1992

I've previously mentioned Andrea Modica twice ([here](#) and [here](#)), but failed to mention her terrific pictures of Minor League baseball players. Modica was interviewed about the work as part of the Smithsonian *Photographers at Work* series:

How did your series of pictures of baseball players come about?

I was on a date and we went to a baseball game. Now I had absolutely no interest in or knowledge of the game at that point, but I live in a tiny town and one thing you can do in the summer is go to a ball game. Although I wasn't interested in the game, I could get a close look at these players, because in minor league baseball you can sit right near the field. They're very close. So this pitcher walked in front of me and I noticed his cheekbones. I thought, "My, what fabulous cheekbones, and how that little cap sets them off." While I watched the game, I wondered who on earth would choose this for a career. I mean, hitting this little ball around seemed so silly. These guys work very hard, they make very little money, and maybe two percent of minor league players go on to the major leagues. Knowing that, I was really curious about why they would do it, and I thought about this so much that it occurred to me, almost in a dream, to photograph these players. And I'll tell you something, I woke up in a cold sweat. I was so scared of this particular project.

Why did you make portraits of the players rather than pictures of the game being played?

Because of my intense curiosity about them. After putting it off for a while, I contacted the team owner and asked if I could do this. He said yes, if I also got the team manager to agree. Sometimes when I was working

with these guys they exhibited certain behavior that made me very uncomfortable, which was hard to deal with. But a certain discomfort was also a part of the family project.

You find this tension surrounding your differences with certain people stimulating?

I figure that if photographing a situation makes me this nervous there must be something for me to learn, and that makes it worth doing. It's not only about taking good pictures.

I like that Modica is honest about her fears and her motivation. These pictures are as much about great cheekbones as they are about baseball. There is even a homoerotic quality to some of the pictures:



Ray Suplee and Craig Hawkins, Oneonta Yankees, Oneonta, New York, 1992

More from Modica:

Initially, I might be interested in someone's cheekbones, but when I'm ready to take the guy's picture maybe his buddy comes along. What happens between the buddies? In the pictures of couples or groups, what becomes apparent is perhaps a power play. Sometimes it appears that one person has a little more power over the other. Remember, these players are highly competitive but they also really need each other – they need to work together closely. Well, one day two players showed up for a photograph – now, I hadn't asked them to pose together – but the pitching coach later explained to me that one was a shortstop and the other a second baseman, and they were "married" on the field. It was curious that they wanted to be photographed together.

This homoerotic element brings to mind the work of [Bruce Weber](#). I can't find any Weber baseball pictures, but he did use this image of Marlon Brando by [Sam Shaw](#) on the cover of one of his All-American Magazines:



Marlon Brando by Sam Shaw

Inside the magazine, Shaw's daughter, Meta Shaw Stevens, talks about the picture:

It was the early 50's at an Actors Studio party in Connecticut. Marlon was playing baseball in a tight bathing suit. The suit had a rip in the back and I remember him picking up a flower (daisy) and putting it in where the hole was. The rest of the day he walked around with that flower sticking out. It was great!

In another Smithsonian *Photographers at Work* book, Bruce Weber is asked about the homoerotic quality of his work:

I think any kind of sexuality in a photograph is really determined by the person looking at the photograph. It has become increasingly hard today for photographers to be able to express their sexual feelings in photographs – and its definitely important to express them. I feel very strongly about that.

I agree with Weber that it is important, but I'm not sure it is increasingly hard to express these feelings. However, he said that in 1992 – long before the web explosion. A lot has changed. And perhaps something has been lost. I love the slightly sublimated sexuality that creeps into photographic specialties like sports or even science photography. Eadweard Muybridge is a good example:



Read Eric Carroll's post on Muybridge [here](#)

Read about Sports Illustrated's 'landmark moment in baseball homoeroticism' [here](#)

7 Comments

1. Dear Alec,

I've had Andrea as a teacher for a semester last fall. She is somehow wonderfully, brutally honest as an educator as well. It's been great to hear all of the asides that are associated with her work and how she arrives at her photographs.

Comment by [Sean](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [10:47 am](#)

2. Great work, remember seeing these Modica pictures years ago when I was in college in upstate NY. Though I'm not sure why hitting a ball (well) for a living would be sillier than any other human ambition. I guess it all depends on your point of view. Let's see....

"While I watched the photographer, I wondered who on earth would choose this for a career. I mean, fiddling with this little contraption for hours on end seemed so silly. These guys work very hard, they make very little money, and maybe two percent of photographers go on to a successful career in the art world. Knowing that, I was really curious about why they would do it...."

Comment by [Natasha](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [11:06 am](#)

3. I recently purchased this book, and the work is, as you say excellent. Her honesty, genuine curiosity, and real connection with her sitters makes her work very special indeed.

As Sean, mentioned, she is an excellent instructor. I took a week long workshop with her two and a half years ago, and have worked at a ravenous pace since. I have her to thank for the inspiration and the motivation.

I would recommend her workshops to anyone interested in portraiture.

Comment by [Suzanne](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [11:31 am](#)

4. I find it interesting that the female take on male beauty or male sexuality in photography is so rarely explored or defined (aside from that Germaine Greer 'Beautiful Boy' book—but that book has its limitations). Even here, these works are being called homoerotic. Are they? Sporty men photographed by a woman, for their beauty... Is that homoerotic? Are C. Schorr's wrestlers homoerotic? I saw Weber speak last week, and even he (the perceived pioneer of homoeroticism in commercial photography) always seems to shy away from that term. In his quote here, he seems to be putting the sexuality of a photograph in the hands of the viewer. My question is: what is homoerotic photography right now? Is this term outdated? Do women produce homoerotic photographs when they depict men as being beautiful?

Comment by [A.W.](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [12:59 pm](#)

5. A.W., the title of the post is Erotic Baseball Photography (not Homoerotic). I would say that the first picture, the man in the light, is simply erotic. Only after introducing Modica's work do I write that "there is even a homoerotic quality to some of the pictures." I then point to a picture of one man embracing another. This is followed up with Modica's quote on certain players being "married." I am talking about specific pictures of men together.

Nevertheless, I think you bring up an interesting point. And I love that you mention Schorr. One of these days I'll write about my own wrestling pictures. These were taken years ago – well before I'd seen Schorr's or Weber's wrestling pictures. I am straight, but I'd never deny that some of these pictures are homoerotic.

Slightly unrelated question: Isn't it curious that the word 'homoerotic' always applies to men?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — June 13, 2007 @ [8:31 pm](#)

6. Alec,

It is curious, and sorry if my message sounded like I was taking you to task for your labeling—I wasn't at all. I myself seem to always label sexual and/or beautiful images of men as homoerotic, and I was kind of questioning that, hoping to engender a discussion. And your point is interesting about 'homoerotic' always applying to men. Please do write about your wrestling pictures, I'd be eager to read your thoughts!

Comment by A.W. — June 14, 2007 @ [8:39 am](#)

7. i'm so glad you posted about these photos. i saw andrea give a lecture where she showed these images in the greater context of her work and i was blown away. so intriguing how no matter what the intent of her images, her work always maintains a tense balance between an uneasy discomfort and an equally haunting beauty.

Comment by [carey](#) — June 15, 2007 @ [8:44 am](#)