

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

July 9, 2007

## Papageorge-palooza

Filed under: Papageorge — alecsothblog @ 6:52 am

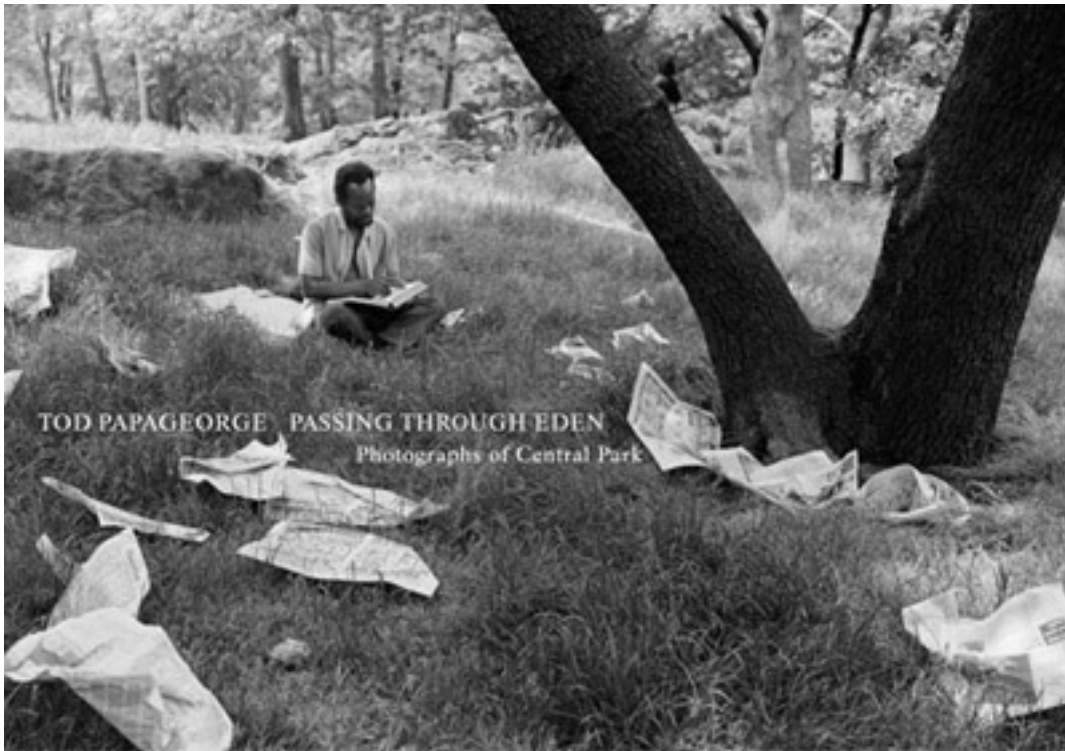
In a recent post I noted that most of my photographic education has come from American publications. As a consequence, I'm neck deep in the Walker Evans tradition. Sometimes this is frustrating. I get tired of the whole Yale-MoMa mind meld. Of course Eggleston didn't invent color photography (see the recent *Colour Before Color* show). And if I hear one more student talking about their Yale application I'm going to puke.

For years I've been bewildered by one of the deacons of this church: Tod Papageorge. As often as I've heard his name bandied about, until recently I'd seen very few of his pictures. The only work I remember was from the book *American Images: New Work by Twenty Contemporary Photographers*. Judging from the handful of pictures in the book, it looked like Papageorge was just doing a medium format take on Winogrand's *Women Are Beautiful*. Same boobs, higher resolution.

I once mentioned that every photographer is at the mercy of "the sentence" – the shorthand blurb that everyone uses to sum up an artist. Nowadays the sentence to describe Papageorge is "He's the guy that runs the Yale photography program." But I think it used to be: "He's the guy who hung around Winogrand."

I don't want to like Tod Papageorge. I don't care that he runs Yale or that he was drinking buddies with Szarkowski. And from some of the things you read, he doesn't sound like such a great guy. "He was a bastard, and he did not like my work in any way," said Philip-Lorca diCorcia.

When I heard Papageorge was publishing his first book, I started sharpening my daggers. So it is with great frustration that I'm admitting I have a new sentence for Papageorge: "He's the guy who published his first book, a classic called *Passing Through Eden*, when he was 67."



*Passing Through Eden* erased all of my preconceptions. While there is no denying that this book evokes the usual suspects (Winogrand, Szarkowski, Friedlander) it overcomes all with its sure brilliance. Perfect pictures, perfect sequencing and fine printing to boot – *Passing through Eden* is, regrettably, a masterpiece.

To come to terms with all of this, I'm declaring this 'Tod Papageorge Week' on this blog.

- [previous posts on Papageorge here](#) and [here](#)

## 16 Comments

1. Papageorge's new book aside, that single-minded obsession with Yale as the only MFA program worth its salt is on the wane. I say this with a sigh of relief and with no insult intended towards Papageorge, Yale and its many fine MFAs.

Perhaps I'll take up the whole MFA thing over in my neck of the woods... I've been meaning to for a while now.

*Comment by Jen Bekman — July 9, 2007 @ 8:19 am*

2. No body wants to see Alec puke! I am relieved that there can be open discussion about MFA programs and their majesty, so thank you both.

*Comment by karolina — July 9, 2007 @ 8:59 am*

3. Yes its a wonderful book. absolutely worth the wait.

kind of shocked the NY Times hasn't done a big feature on it – after all the park is the heart of New York City, and this is a great, intelligent reflection of a decade-plus of America's post war convulsion, through the prism of Central Park.

when there's so much BS staged photography, its such a relief to have someone making profound work that comes directly from the world, and see it fulfilled and appreciated.

*Comment by narikin — July 9, 2007 @ 9:09 am*

4. While I'm a fan of the Times Sunday Book Review, it really irks me that they do so few photo book reviews. The only time they ever seem to do it is in December with the 'Holiday Books.' Insulting. Even Entertainment Weekly occasionally throws us a bone.

Even without Central Park as subject matter, *Passing Through Eden* is worthy of a serious consideration.

*Comment by Alec Soth — July 9, 2007 @ 9:17 am*

5. That may be the case, but he is still a smug, self-satisfied man. At the Yale MFA open house this year he just sat in the center of the room pontificating about how successful and brutal the program he runs is. Achievement isn't a free pass to arrogance is it?

*Comment by theodore — July 9, 2007 @ 9:24 am*

6. Regarding Theodore's remark above, I have never found Tod to be smug. I don't know what he is like as a university professor but I had the good fortune to have several occasions to sit down and talk with him, mostly about photography. In contrast to the quote by P-L above, I found him to be a very charming and kind man. I think he can be tough about photography but anyone who aspires to be a great photographer should be challenged. I learned a great deal from my conversations with Tod and feel that my life has been enriched from knowing him.

I agree that anyone who sits in one position, particularly one of power, for ten years or more should be questioned. I think criticism of the Yale program is very healthy but I don't think Tod is the only one to pick on, don't forget about Gregory Crewdson.

*Comment by Stuart Alexander — July 9, 2007 @ 10:26 am*

7. Well, speaking of usual suspects, John Szarkowski just departed Saturday:  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/09/arts/09szarkowski.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/09/arts/09szarkowski.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1&oref=slogin)

Never forget that today's old codgers will be replaced by tomorrow's.

*Comment by Michel — July 9, 2007 @ 11:00 am*

8. Mr. Papageorge's recent show at Pace MacGill was, for me, a breath of fresh air in the New York gallery scene that has forced me to raise the bar on myself. I'm glad to read that Alec has acknowledged the brilliance of this body of work. Those interested in Papageorge's process should read Richard B. Woodward's interview in BOMB Magazine.  
<http://www.bombsite.com/papageorge/papageorge.html>

*Comment by Würm — July 9, 2007 @ 11:43 am*

9. Excuse my ignorance but i had never noticed his work before which i cant believe since im such a big fan of Frielander, Egglestone and Winogrand. Now its come to my attention i think his stuff is just great. Thanks for the introduction.

*Comment by Darren — July 10, 2007 @ 7:47 am*

10. [...] Meanwhile, I recommend the spectacle of Mr. Soth's Papageorge-palooza. Also, there are many fine remembrances of John Szarkowski. Want your Szarkowski and Papageorge all in one easy to digest and interesting package? Have a look at Richard Lacayo's recent posts on Looking Around. Digg This Save to Del.icio.us [...]

*Pingback by Personism » Blog Archive » Liar, Liar — July 10, 2007 @ 5:58 pm*

11. [...] Alec has declared it Tod Papageorge week over on his blog. To keep faithful to his declaration he's been a blogging fiend, posting about Papageorge sometimes more than once a day. I've really enjoyed the posts and can agree with him that Papageorge's new book *Passing Through Eden* is quite marvelous. [...]

*Pingback by SHANE LAVALETTE / JOURNAL » Blog Archive » The Problem With Photographers Who Conceive a Picture First, Then Construct It -- According to Tod Papageorge — July 10, 2007 @ 11:16 pm*

12. i just looked on the blog after a brief respite and was happy to learn of the release of tod's book...it is quite amazing. having shared the honor along with p.l .dicorcia and mary frey to be among the students during tod's first year at yale i can say it was difficult. i always found him generous on a one to one basis and brutal in critiques....but illuminating, challenging, supportful at moments and in the end a very positive influence.

*Comment by robert — July 12, 2007 @ 5:34 am*

13. [...] This past week started sort of on a high note. Of all people, Alec Soth put to use the classic and still refreshing formula: "If X one more time, then P" – more specifically, "If I hear one more student talking about their Yale application I'm going to puke." Eureka! Well, I am not going to write yet another review of "Passing Through Eden" here, the book by Yale photography teacher Tod Papageorge that Soth spent a week writing about on his blog. Photographers don't seem like the best reviewers of photography to me – how could they not see other people's work in relation to their own stuff, their own aspirations? Let me just say that I am stunned that "Passing Through Eden", a book of photos taken of passerbies in Central Park in late 20th century, stylistically passé and conceptually perhaps a little light-brained, gets such a rave reception, when the same stuff has been done long before, and better. [...]

*Pingback by The Postmodern Panhandler at Notes From Nowhere — July 13, 2007 @ 2:15 am*

14. i'm so glad you've done t.p. week. i was surrounded by "yale mafia" and tod papageorge this and that for years that i was prepared to dislike him too. and then when i saw the show in may i was

humbled, and happy to be so. i thought immediately that i had understood nothing about this man, and that i had much to learn from him.

i thought of writing about him on my site, but you've done such an amazing job with the research, with the coup of the interview itself, that all i'm able to do is sit back and be a gleeful, and grateful, reader. thank you.

*Comment by stacy — July 13, 2007 @ 6:04 pm*

15. After all the hoopla here, how could I but not get the book. Unfortunately sight unseen. Not making that mistake again anytime soon.

*Comment by Michal Daniel — July 16, 2007 @ 8:34 pm*

16. "And if I hear one more student talking about their Yale application I'm going to puke." Yikes, I never read that until now...sorry to spam you before.

*Comment by David La Spin — September 24, 2007 @ 4:07 am*