

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 30, 2007

John Shabel (Crying and Flying – Part 3)

Filed under: [artists](#), [crying & flying](#) — alecsothblog @ 2:30 pm



Passenger #2, 1995, by John Schabel

I'm a big fan of John Shabel's series, *Passengers*. Over several years, Shabel shot thousands of grainy photographs of airplane passengers from which he selected fifteen images. Along with photographing at night (in order to see inside the plane), Shabel liked to shoot while it rained because it meant the planes were more likely to be delayed on the tarmac. This mix of rain, darkness and grain gives the pictures an especially somber mood.

In an [interview with Egg](#), Shabel describes his pictures as portraits (and reminds me of the [recent discussion](#) of unconscious models):

I think of the “Passenger” photographs as portraits. They’re different from portraits in that the person being photographed is unaware. The passenger is unaware and locked inside an airplane, and the photographer is maybe a hundred yards away in the dark — and possibly under surveillance himself — but even so, the images tend to feel kind of intimate in that situation. I mean, that’s what was fascinating to me about that situation with the person locked inside an airplane. There’s no interaction. They’re unaware they’re being photographed, and I was very far away, maybe a hundred yards in the dark with this long lens and very nervous about someone watching me, and it was a very tense situation. Even so, the images would feel very quiet, and almost intimate.

- Shabel’s pictures bring to mind Merry Alpern’s [Dirty Windows](#) and Todd Heisler’s amazing picture, [Reno Airport](#) (previously discussed [here](#)).

12 Comments

1. Also, Bill Sullivan's "[3 Situations](#)" work.

Comment by John — March 30, 2007 @ [3:22 pm](#)

2. Birds of a feather, he and I. My name links to what I mean...

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — March 30, 2007 @ [3:29 pm](#)

3. how many before we are considered a [flock](#)?

Comment by [ed](#) — March 30, 2007 @ [6:45 pm](#)

4. Let me first say I appreciate the information and wit of your blog!

I'm just beginning a documentary project photographing and interviewing patients at a rehab hospital. I'm having a difficult time putting together a release form that isn't too complex and that the hospital's legal will approve. Obviously shabel couldn't obtain or even desire to obtain releases for these images beforehand. Can anyone give any suggestions for information regarding the use of release forms for work that blurs the line between art and documentary?

Comment by Arne — March 30, 2007 @ [7:56 pm](#)

5. Arne, check what Thomas Roma did in the Brooklyn Criminal Court building, that is in the book "Enduring Justice", maybe this could Help...

Comment by Cristian Ureta — March 30, 2007 @ [9:06 pm](#)

6. W. Evans: The Passengers.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — March 30, 2007 @ [10:13 pm](#)

7. is that the same body of work as 'many are called'?

Comment by [aizan](#) — March 31, 2007 @ [10:20 am](#)

8. Hey Ed, how lovely to be able to tell you here that I've always ADORED your work!!!

And Alzan, it has to be "Many are Called" because there is no other body of Evans' work dealing with passengers.

Comment by [Michal Daniel](#) — March 31, 2007 @ [11:08 am](#)

9. i was just looking at the book "Walker Evans at Work" and it had a mock-up of his subway book "The Passengers" from 1959. title must have changed when published in 1966.

Comment by [j zorn](#) — March 31, 2007 @ [11:32 am](#)

10. There is also this woman.....

http://www.alexandratiere.com/portfolio3_1.html

Comment by Horton — April 2, 2007 @ [8:48 am](#)

11. Michal, thanks...appreciated and likewise.

Horton, thanks for the link, wasn't familiar with her stuff and diggin' it. something special when eye contact is made and there is this added barrier or degree of separation.

Comment by [ed](#) — April 2, 2007 @ [8:45 pm](#)

12. Hi Alec,

Not to promote my self, but in my own work of recent I also have been making a kind of portraiture like some of the work mentioned above. My work is with out a doubt influenced by the Walker Evans images, though I do think that there are other things going on in the images. I am perhaps not the best one to judge. <http://www.stefanabrams.com>

Comment by [stefan](#) — April 8, 2007 @ [6:46 pm](#)