

Speaks

jerry Cullum

*a closing lecture to the Atlanta Photography Group
on the occasion of the **Emerging Visions Show**
September 13, 2003*

There was a picture, once, of Paris, two-thirds of the way closer to the beginning of photography, and it spawned thousands of imitators in the past century. That is part of what it means to have made a “good picture”, in quotes: one that establishes the rules for its successors. It is something else to have copied that picture, learning the trade in much the same way that easel painters copied masterworks, and it is something else again to have absorbed its lessons and applied them to other topics and other climates. And, to belabor the obvious, something else again to absorb not just the lessons of the picture but the motivation that led to the picture’s creation, allowing the student to do the same, but dramatically different, for the twenty-first century.

I’m sure that all of you felt that all this is painfully obvious. Anybody who ever took a photo course, as distinct from a class in how to make pictures, has been told what you have to do to get beyond the level of taking snapshots. Everybody in this show demonstrates that they have absorbed those lessons, on various levels. Some of you are very aware of the most recent dialogues, the critique of fashion photography, the re-creation of conceptualism as a visual enterprise, and so on. Whether in terms of making a good landscape picture or creating social commentary, the photographers in “*Emerging Visions*” are a very informed group. And you are here because you have no choice but to pick up your work

(more)

So what do I have to say to you, since unlike other jurors, I cannot address the question everybody cares about: that question being, having learned how to make and print a memorable photographic image with immense aesthetic and intellectual value, what do I have to do to sell it? What is the fair price, how do I get my values up, yada yada yada. Totally valid questions, incredibly important questions, and the only people who know the answers are the photo dealers who sell stuff to clients all day. But it ain't me, babe, as Bob Dylan wrote in his youth,.

Likewise, I cannot claim infallibility in the technical realms, the other subject that everyone cares about; I can tell a badly printed photo, and I have looked at one too many comparisons of the shifts in Ansel Adams' gray scale, but I can be bamboozled with the best of them, it's one of many reasons I am a general purpose art critic with some knowledge of photography, not a photography critic. (I also do theory once in a while, but increasingly I do even that for a mass audience.) So what is it that general purpose art critics do? Well, mostly, they act as intermediaries between the artists and the general audience who knows even less about art than the general purpose critic does; until their critic or their decorator explains it all for them, they may not even know what it is that they like. Until the general purpose critic has provided them with a cultural context, something in which decorators are usually fairly incompetent, they may not even know why it is that they like it.

So since the selection of any show, after the obvious garbage has been weeded out, comes down to what the juror likes or thinks needs to be in the show even if they dislike it. Most of you plainly already know that this means the rules change every time. Something that merits graduation with honors in a degree program may be so conceptually wrong for an exhibition that it has no hope of getting on the wall; everybody knows not to submit anti-globalization allegories to a show called "America the Beautiful." What to do is less obvious, when confronted with a blandly all-encompassing title like "Emerging Visions,"; the name was obviously designed to include everybody.

(more)

A few people seem to have paid attention to what it is that I seem to like, and acted accordingly; some of them have even been rewarded for it. On the other hand, psyching out the juror's supposed tastes is not always successful, either. You have ten chances to overwhelm the juror with your talent and perspicacity, and part of the game is that you have no idea what the competition is like. All kinds of weirdnesses result; several times over the years I have seen jurors pick almost identical photographs by three different photographers, and tried to figure out if the jurors were making a comment or if they just happened to be obsessed by pictures of oak trees, systematic cognitive uncertainty, or whatever. Sometimes what looks like psychological obsession is underpinned by deeply thought out theory; other times what looks like intensely considered theory is really just the juror's private preference. What ya gonna do, with those odds?

As the Dalai Lama once memorably said in response to an equally monumental question, "I don't know." So instead of trying to answer all those practical questions, I am going to answer a few practical questions about making theoretically based work, and those questions will have to do with how this show was selected and installed. (I am mostly going to sidestep questions of theory per se.) I didn't choose the sequence of installation, the long-suffering APG staff did, but I approved it. And I approved it for reasons that will soon be apparent.

Okay. I was impressed, as Felicia Feaster perceptively noticed, with the way in which the work I had chosen fell into several familiar contemporary categories. Felicia's review left out the straight-ahead genre work, and mysteriously left out the entire wall devoted primarily to psychosocial unease, whether psychological, political, or Southern Gothic. What I like about Alisa Lewis's "Meat and Fur," for example, is that it turns out to be a very political work expressed in the language of the nineteenth-century symbolist-decadent tradition. The narcissistic self consumes the flesh and fur of animals and simultaneously presents its own fleshly products for adoration but also for consumption and so on.

(more)

But I digress. One thing should be apparent from this show, and it's also pretty self-evident. Photography is not a purely conceptual art, though various people have presented some really good conceptual substitutes for photographs (like the blocks of text in last year's Documenta describing photographs that could not be taken: "Cameras were not allowed in Nelson Mandela's prison cell" and so on). A photograph that positions itself within our world of the post-feminist, the post-industrial, and the Post family of breakfast cereals is, nevertheless, not post-visual. It is still a physical object or a pattern of projected light or pixels. Mallarme (I think) once told an admirer who praised his ideas, "But Madame, a poem does not consist of ideas. A poem is made out of words." Likewise, a photograph is first of all an image; it is never only an image, but it is also never less than an image, even if the image is of an abstract pattern. Even if the image is of a block of text.

I bring this up because the images in this show came to me with the maximum number of accessories. They arrived with titles, descriptions of media and dimensions, and in some cases artist's statements. So I perused all of that and then dropped everything into a slide carousel to see what would convince me visually. Then I tried to figure out, among the intellectually based works, which ones were visually strongest. Then I tried to figure out which ones spoke for themselves as images and which ones needed a couple of other images to set the context of the larger body of work.

Other jurors would have chosen on a different basis. And in curated shows, there are plenty of cases in which a curator picks the weakest work in the bunch because it illustrates the point of the wall text. (As in, "Well, this is a heavy-handed overblown piece of crap, but the woman walking to the airplane is talking on a cell phone while being the object of the Lacanian gaze.") Juried shows aren't like that, or they shouldn't be.

As long as I don't name names, I don't mind saying that there are cases in which I picked a single conceptually strong image because it was one of the most interesting in a whole series of conceptually powerful images. There were other cases in which I picked a single conceptually strong image because all the others in the series were overblown, not quite resolved, or visually unconvincing.

(more)

Every artist is going to have four hits and six misses. It is perfectly possible to produce one work of genius and nine candidates for the wastebasket. Or three winners and six losers. Or, alas, ten slightly boring winners. Or, even more alas, ten extremely interesting failures. That isn't the case in this show, but there have been juried shows in which I put something in just because I had never before seen something that failed so ambitiously. An artist trying to do something amazing and not getting there can be as instructive and certainly more interesting than an artist striving to make the latest variation on something that's been done roughly half a million times previously. But there are levels of incoherence below which intention no longer counts.

Is this helping at all? I don't think so. I was very reluctant to start grouping things thematically because, as you will have noted with the work of Joy Drury Cox and Niki Hancock, it makes it look like the work of the same photographer. (Cox does photograph in other color ranges, as you'll get to see in a week or so at Saltworks, and believe me, I had to go back over the slides to make sure that I didn't just like interior shots in blue.) Plus I believe in people's capacity to notice structural and intellectual similarities even at a distance.

So in spite of having singled out "Meat and Fur," precisely because of its singularity, I'm reluctant to start discussing the structural thematics (for one thing, it's hard to follow this stuff in a spoken lecture): how various photographs address identity, how identity is revealed by the way we arrange our personal objects, what it means to rearrange the world as you find it versus creating fictionalized versions of the presentation of self, etc Obviously, in this show we have everything from beginning with the body to beginning with the furniture to beginning with the built environment. We have photographs that begin and end with the world as they saw it. (Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that his philosophy, instead of being presented under titles like "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus," could be titled "The World as I Saw It."). We have photographs that construct symbolic equivalents for emotional conditions. We have photographs that find the symbols already there, deposited by the human beings who had those emotions.

(more)

People in the show have looked attentively at, and learned from, William Eggleston, Laura Letinsky, Nan Goldin, Gregory Crewdson, Jeff Wall, the list goes on and on and includes most of the various intellectual options open to photographers in the early years of the twenty-first century. As I said, I was reluctant to discuss any of this because inevitably, someone's name is left out .

In fact, since the 32 people in this show, unlike Wall, Goldin, and company, are not yet household names, I ought to end by reciting the names in question and anybody who wants to identify themselves can do the usual little wave, stand up, start disrobing, whatever. And then I'm done. Sorry, this is gonna sound like graduation day, but I know for a fact that everybody didn't meet everybody else at the opening: So:

*Rose M. Barron, Hadley Breckinridge, Elizabeth Church,
Penny L. Colangelo, Joy Drury Cox, Betty Edge,
Elizabeth Edwards, Pamela Ellerbrock, Allison Evans,
Niki Hancock, Blair Hoover, Carlie John, Nahna Kim,
Jenny Levine, Alisa S. Lewis, Haley Antoinette Mauldin,
Shannon McEvoy, Ellen McRaney, Audra Melton, Marc M.
Middlebrooks, Camilla A. Petersen. Tahara Portis, Kevin J
Saunders, Daniela Sbrisny, Jeff Rich, Rebecca Schaper,
Jeffrey Skillings, Angela Karen Smith, Susan E. Tzetzso,
Adam Waterson, Lyndsy Welgos, Joshua Wien*

Questions? Challenges? Personal insults?

#

(Mr. Cullum followed his lecture with an informal walk and talk through the Atlanta Photography Group Gallery offering further personal insight to the participating and present photographers)

© Jerry Cullum 2003 - used by permission for the Atlanta Photography Group