



A Snapshot

In student critiques, I like to make a distinction between meanings and motivations. Simply put, meanings consist of whatever can be read in a work itself; whatever we can glean from formal and thematic elements whether overt or subtle as long as they can be supported by the piece under discussion. Motivations consist of myriad emotions, events and intentions, conscious or unconscious, that cause us to make the work in the first place, the deep context behind a work that may or may not bear any

resemblance to its final form. Admittedly, it's a rough distinction, and countless exceptions or qualifications spring to mind. Yet it's useful. Critiques often become a means for making the two coincide, for making intentions manifest in the work, essentially turning context into text, incorporating outside elements to the point where they become available to a viewer. Or they may result in a discovery and an acceptance of something that points beyond and leaves behind the artist's initial impetus.

In personal photographs, motivations are primary. Aside from general cultural codes, they rely on stories to bring them to life, a soundtrack of sorts that explains the occasion that inspired them and identifies the major players. They entail comments about the background and a set of emotions not available in the image itself. They traffic in the invisible as a corollary to the image. In any conventional sense they're authorless. Less an expression of an individual vision than a record of an occasion, they usually contribute to a shared but limited community of picture makers who are simultaneously audiences. The context becomes a way of making sense of the image while also cementing existing social and familial bonds. It provides information that explains personalities and clarifies occasions. More important than the image are an invisible landscape and a set of stories for which the photograph is a prompt.

This photo has accompanied me for over 40 years and has gained layers of significance since it was taken. It shows two figures seated in a landscape, apparently a cemetery, as indicated by the gravestones in the background. The top of a wine bottle pokes up from bottom left. The figure on the right is clearly reading something as he holds a cigarette. Both wear glasses. The attire, the haircuts give away the time period as early- to mid-seventies.

So much for what's discernable in the photo itself. We need a supplement, a guide to specifics. The figure on the left is Judson Evans, a classmate at Wilkes College, an aspiring poet. I'm the figure on the right, reading from Frank O'Hara's Selected Poems. The occasion is a pilgrimage to Franz Kline's grave in the Wilkes-Barre City Cemetery. We're accompanied by the artist and teacher, Berenice D'Vorzon, who's responsible for the image.

The photograph divides time into an asymmetrical before and after, memories that precede and follow a moment lasting a fraction of a second that nonetheless represents a concentration of narrative trajectories that give it a density and weight. Minutes before Berenice snaps the photo, the cemetery's caretaker leads us to the gravesite and tells us his story. He's been caring for the site for years and has been in frequent contact with Kline's widow who once offered him a painting to thank him for taking care of the site. Admitting to not understanding modern art, he

expresses regret when reminded how much Kline's paintings are worth. "I know" he says "I'm laughing through my tears."

Before that very specific moment, the memories become foggier, more general. About three years before Berenice releases the shutter, Judson and I become close friends. In college we move in the same circles, go to the same parties, take many of the same classes. And we share the same drunken weekends, drug experiences, and sexual adventures.

Further upstream, our early formative experiences are significantly different: for Judson a middle-class Protestant upbringing, a tree nursery owned by his father and uncles, a home in the country; for me Catholic school and a home life marked by religious devotion, a small-town house next to the dress factory that employed my mother, the iron foundry where my father worked.

We compare stories. Judson talks about his grandfather, a left-wing Welsh minister who led a revolt in Haiti and thought of the Russian Revolution as the second coming of Christ. I respond with tales of my two grandfathers, one prematurely dead from black lung disease, the other a survivor driving a locomotive for the coal company and a union member.

Further back, everything is more or less impersonal, part of the historical record. Waves of immigration from Wales and Eastern Europe, world wars, and the

beginnings of the coal mining industry, a network of stories handed down to us, read about or intuited, which finally leaps from historical to geological time, stopping in a mineral world, whose uncovering and exploitation underwrites our memories.

Two other figures are invisible.

One is Franz Kline, who was born in Wilkes-Barre in 1910 and buried there in 1962. Kline lived in Pennsylvania for a good portion of his youth before moving to New York, where he achieved fame as an abstract expressionist painter. Beyond the bare facts there are the stories of his breakthrough, heroic drinking in the Cedar Bar, teaching at Black Mountain College, For us part of the fascination involves his origins and the later arc of his career. Kline was one of us, proving that it was possible to reach beyond the limited possibilities of Wilkes-Barre. His abstractions were based on landscapes we knew with some intimacy: slag heaps, railroad bridges, coal breakers. We recognized the pattern of black on white, or of black breaking through a white surface. Something akin to yet never quite and never simply a winter landscape. He was proof that the motives for art could begin anywhere.

Kline was our link to a broader world. And Berenice, behind the camera, was our link to Kline. Berenice was born in New York in 1932. After school at Cranbrook and Columbia, she found her way into Abstract Expressionist circles and to shows at the Aldrich and Whitney Museums. She had a special relationship with Kline,

whom she once described as a father figure and protector. There were stories about his struggles with alcohol, his marriage and the trappings of success including a black Jaguar with a white interior. A flamboyant figure in a small college, Berniece was quick to mention her connection to Kline, the DeKoonings and other people in the New York art scene. So we were often regaled with stories about our heroes, ranging from Allen Ginsberg to Judy Collins. In Brad Gooch's biography of Frank O'Hara there's a flyer advertising one of her shows in the background of a photograph.

Berenice was an important part of a larger community, a coterie of would-be and real artists and writers, students and teachers joined in the kind of small-town bohemia common in the 70's, a refuge for misfits and a laboratory for unconventional social behaviors that would later be taken for granted. There was an easy commerce between students and teachers at the time which, in spite of some indiscretions, provided us with a sense that what we cared about was valuable and, more importantly, possible.

The downstream moments grow more ample. We might compare them to Walter Benjamin's angel of history flying backwards and watching the rubble of progress pile up in front of his eyes, What I have in mind is more humble though not unmarked by larger historical currents: the end of the Viet Nam War, the growth

of gay rights, feminism, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the AIDS crisis, two Gulf Wars, 9/11. Our technologies become obsolete: 8-track tapes, cassettes, typewriters, slide projectors, slides. It's something like sitting backward on a moving train watching the photograph shrink in the distance while other images emerge from the periphery. Judson's path diverges from mine, though we always maintain contact, and both of us keep copies of the photograph which for me was almost always taped to a wall or tacked to a bulletin board.

A car accident sometime in 1977 leaves us badly shaken yet, as a shared trauma, cements our friendship even further. Then Judson's move to Boston and his gradual emergence as a serious poet, my marriage, my struggles with alcoholism, and Judson's coming out of the closet. We both we go on to get MAs. I become a photographer. Judson keeps writing and establishes a successful career as a humanities chair at the Boston Conservatory of Music and eventually marries after gay unions became legal in Massachusetts. After receiving an MFA, I teach photography for 7 years at Ohio University before returning to New Jersey and my wife. An offhand comment by Judson about the geological connection between the Pennsylvania and South Wales coalfields inspires a trip to Wales in 2004 and what eventually became my first serious body of work.

These are some of the bare facts, major events that spring to mind to cover a broad span of time. The stuff of resumes and obituaries, minus the smaller moments

which give our life, any life, its texture. The photograph has stood as an emblem of our friendship, a relationship that has lasted longer than most friendships and certainly than most marriages. It's commented on our lives serving as a touchstone of sorts, not simply a nostalgic relic, a memento of an idealized past, but a measure for our dreams, sometimes a rebuke, sometimes a reminder of how much we've managed to keep the faith.

We both gradually lost track of Berenice, though we received word about her from various sources: a divorce, a move back to New York, an increasingly troubled relationship with her son. She died in 2014, so a further absence haunts this account dictated by the function of the photographer *as* photographer, the one behind the camera. Her death changes the photograph even further adding a greater aura of melancholy, turning it into a *memento mori* of sorts, her absence from the photo becoming an emblem of a deeper absence. Something less functional, more palpable and more poignant. She begins to take on the role of Roland Barthes' mother, famously absent from *Camera Lucida*. But there her absence was a choice on Barthes part. An expression of his reluctance to share something that could only be meaningful to him. Here, it's a function of the occasion, of the necessary absence of the image maker from the image however embedded in the same landscape. It gains a heavier sense of gravity.

As time goes by, there's a closer identification with Berenice as the bearer of something between a glance and a gaze, an invitation to step behind the lens into a place that's invisible yet continuous with the landscape in the photo. The framing, the choice of when to snap the shutter becomes more pointedly hers yet over time the images also becomes our gaze, the equivalent of a linguistic shifter, the "I" that can be spoken by anyone, making any observer the eye behind the camera. By now it's our older selves behind the lens looking at our younger counterparts from the perspective that we look at our own students. It's a curious mirror where we're both mentors and proteges, teachers and students. At the same time, it's her mirror. And her gift.

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