

Insta

Meditations on Photography

Looking backwards through my archive, and forwards with ongoing and unfinished work, I post my daily images. However, it's in the here and now that an image is marked. Perhaps that's an old fashioned idea now that we encode and reencode images and move them around electronically through the matrix of social media. I joined Instagram in January of this second year in the pandemic. I had to join to connect with an online gallery that, as it turned out, never returned my offer to contribute. Within seconds of "following" my teenage daughter, she came stomping into my room demanding to know why I had trespassed. She graciously accepted my explanation so long as I promised not to comment on her posts. I have kept my promise.

I am certainly late in my arrival on Instagram. I had judged it, looked down on it, but failed to recognize it for what it is or could be. It's true that Instagram feeds on narcissism, but it's also a fun way to keep in touch with my former photography students. That alone is precious to me, especially as I inch my way towards retirement.

Once, long ago, probably around 1998, when I was teaching at UCLA, I mentioned that photography would look very different in the future, that we would actually be able to take a picture with a phone, hit a button, and it would appear on the internet. They laughed at me. They did not believe me. It only took six months or so before this became a reality in Japan, and quickly everywhere else. Most photography is done on phones now, and it is true that the images can be very good in a limited kind of way. I suppose nowadays being a photographer entails investigating beyond the limited options of phone photography. Still, I posted an image taken on my phone just the other day. It's sort of a modern day Polaroid. I miss the charm of Polaroids. Just finished reading *M Train* by Patti Smith. It is a rare collection of brilliant and charming writing and very personal and biographical peel-apart Polas, a process now extinct. Cell phone and Polaroid, both instants of sort, yet worlds apart. One a discrete singular artifact, the other across the planet in an buffered moment.

This morning I learned that my Instagram is broken, or something. I can only post a single image, no multiples. Just now I asked my daughters, experts in the field, if they could identify the problem and even they could not unlock the riddle. It would seem I shall be henceforth singular in my posts unless some unforeseen change occurs. I was going to put up my photogram series *Global*, having uploaded a couple other similar works in recent days, but that shall not come to pass, not today. I've been waffling anyway about posting my photograms, the artwork I am best known for. In the large picture of my career in the arts making photograms has been a significant, yet secondary calling. Strange how we construct a sense of self out of deeds and artifacts, seen and unseen. Making photograms has been for me a kind of tabula rasa, a starting over when I stray into directionless-ness. Like the mandala offering plate used in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist ritual, with these photograms translucent offering substances occupy the circles of light traced into negative.

After the no-can-post-Global on Instagram disaster I thought I might skip a day, but instead went ahead and posted one of my early Watershed Edge black and white pictures from 1999. Just now, I downloaded and looked at some shots I took yesterday in Echo Park and Little Tokyo. I edited and posted the best three. I kind of like the idea of breaking away from the one-picture-a-day regimen I have of late resigned myself to, so as to sort of ration a lifetime's work over a year or two of posts. Rather I like to now and then insert the daybook approach. When I was in Echo Park I picked up a copy of Haruki Murakami's novel The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, which has already got me sucked-in, in a strangely nurturing and curious way. Patti Smith couldn't praise it enough in M Train, and Addison, the lovely bookseller in the new bookshop *des pair* on Echo Park Blvd. backed her up. I finished my grading today and will submit the news tomorrow. Although I have been most generous, the lack of turned in work was record breaking. It has been the most distantly grueling semester of my career as a photography teacher, and I need a little Wind-Up Bird reverie to help me see someone else's story and loosen the grip on my own. Perhaps my pictures on yesterday's walk will do the same for someone else, which is to say, ignite the imagination.

"I feel somewhat torn between fighting to recover what I've lost, and letting go and accepting things as they are," is what I told Roberto yesterday before he went to work on my ageing body. I was talking about not being able to do certain Tibetan yoga techniques anymore. I'm still not resigned to it. Recently, I read an interview with Jackson Browne wherein he says something to the effect that the worst thing is to measure the next song by comparing it with past efforts. Today is today, simply said, and endlessly forgotten. We make the music, write the words, and produce the pictures that call to be made now and only now, never ending or beginning, rooted in space. One of the characters in The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle, Mr. Honda says "It's not a question of better or worse. The point is not to resist the flow. When you are supposed to go up, find the highest tower and climb to the top. When you're supposed to go down, find the deepest well and go to the bottom. When there's no flow stay still. If you resist the flow everything dries up, the world is darkness." I understand what he means, particularly in relation to taking pictures. Sometimes I just walk with my camera with no intentions except to be mindfully present, see deeply, and translate that seeing into pictures. Yesterday, after my camera-walk in Echo Park and my treatment from Roberto, I felt the calling to stop in Little Tokyo and get a Midori Matcha soft serve. I went with the flow. Not long after parking I found a beautifully dirty sign behind the glass of a doorway on First Street that said "Los Angeles County Stands United Against Hate." I took some pictures of it, one of which I posted this afternoon with the two from Echo Park.

Pictures of my gear, my reflection, and pictures about other pictures, these are the most popular ones. Yet what gets liked or ignored is a fickle thing for the most part. Some of my favorite all time photographs have received barely a nod, while others taken on a lark that I scarcely bothered to post get more attention. One can devise ways to tag pictures so as to amplify likes and followers, but that is strange to me. I post a picture that means something to me. That is enough. Liking can be a burden. I am generally very generous with my liking, and my grading for that matter, these days. The pandemic has made me less judgmental and more forgiving, or at least I'd like to think so. Two quick taps of the thumb on the screen, with no need to pick a particular emoji, that's all it takes to give someone a lift. Still, the heart longs to be liked, and the absence of that can be a great source of despair. I remember when my dear

friend John Goss once said “We love to be adored,” and with those words sort of nailed it. The problem is the despair of being alone, rather than rejoicing in the aloneness of retreat from ignorance. It boils down to letting go, not of things, or people, or even emotions, but to catch them at their root and liberate the grasping to self into wisdom-awareness. Fictitious being always returns, but you can train in the release, and little by little find peace in moments of nowness. It is also in nowness that pictures present themselves.

After a short break I'm back to irregular posting now. I'm feeling a bit more distanced from any kind of pressure to be liked or prove anything. Previously I was trying to string brief visual poems out of my archive and current work into my profile, but now I'm feeling content to just respond to what unfolds daily. I guess the reason my interest continues to be held is both a kind of optimism and a yearning. Anyone my age who still makes work, who has done so much work and received so little acclaim is by definition an optimist. I don't really think of myself that way. In fact, it seems like to be an optimist is just setting oneself up for disappointment. What I mean is that making art still makes sense to me, despite all the rejection. In that sense, art is sort of like love. When I say that I am still held by yearning, I mean yearning for community. No one lives in a vacuum, and although a degree of solitude is necessary for any kind of originality, a picture is not really complete till it has been shared.

Maybe it's the pandemic, I don't know, but I really feel like I am in a new phase and the world is in a new era. My square, black and white, medium-format film photography has given sway to the ease of digital color. Instead of being committed to keeping things simple, I am embracing the whole gamut of possibilities, from 4 x5 film pinhole to stitching with a digital view camera. Which is to say, I am multi-tracking my focus. It's pointless to resist change.

A question arises today. Do I feel worthy of being appreciated as an artist? This gives rise to another question: Is my lack of recognition a result of a lack of talent and effort, or a consequence of my own self-doubt. When I see artist friends investing tens of thousands of dollars into framing costs I have to really appreciate their confidence. Maybe I waited so long to join Instagram in part because I was trying to protect myself from more rejection. It is time to put all that behind me.

Is all art equal? Are your artifacts from kindergarten equal to those done in grad school or thereafter? Are all posts equally likeable? If they were we could never like or pass over a post. The quality of something is not separate from its emptiness. A quality describes a thing. It is like the blueness of space. To attribute qualities to things is an expression of discriminating awareness, inseparable from emptiness. Problems only arise when we grasp at things as inherently likeable or not.

I posted a picture of Natalie and her shadow the other day. Her back is facing the camera, so one can't see her lovely face, but only imagine it. It got more likes than any other picture I have thus far posted. Instagram is where people go to adore women.

Looking again, I see there was one picture with one more like, a lonely vertical landscape, two-thirds monochrome Rothko sky looking west over the dry landscape and looming sea. Six symmetrical converging wooden steps lodged in the earth invite the viewer in, centered at the

bottom of the frame. I am pleased people like it, but that sure blows my theory about what entails popularity. I am left with the yearning to return to the mountains and sea with my gear, not to seek out likes, but to clear my mind.