

ROBERT ADAMS

BEAUTY
IN
PHOTOGRAPHY
ESSAYS
IN
DEFENSE
OF
TRADITIONAL
VALUES

APERTURE

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Published by Aperture.

Distributed in the United States by Viking Penguin Inc.;
in Canada by Penguin Books Canada Limited, Markham, Ontario;
in the United Kingdom and Europe by Phaidon Press Limited, Oxford;
in Italy by Idea Books, Milan;
and in Australia by George Allen & Unwin Australia Pty. Ltd.
Aperture, a division of Silver Mountain Foundation, Inc.,
publishes a periodical, books, and portfolios of fine photography
to communicate with serious photographers and creative people
everywhere. A complete catalog is available upon request.
Address: 20 East 23 Street, New York, New York 10010.

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No.: 81-66767.
ISBN 0-89381-080-0 Cloth
ISBN 0-89381-087-8 Paper

Design by Charles Mikolaycak
Composition by Printworks, Inc., Norwalk, Connecticut
Printed and bound by the Murray Printing Company,
Westford, Massachusetts.

A John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant supported
final stages of manuscript preparation; a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, provided partial
funding for the publication. "Civilizing Criticism" was first
published by the Friends of Photography, Carmel, California,
as "Good News" in *Untitled 14*; "C. A. Hickman" appeared as
"Inhabited Nature" in *Aperture 81*.

For William Main

And the hour.

But it is the same land.

And I begin to know the map

And to get my bearings.

Judged by the achievement of Hammarskjöld's life, the insight was an enabling one. And it was, I think, strengthened by his fondness for landscape art, the main business of which is a rediscovery and revaluation of where we find ourselves.

BEAUTY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE POET William Bronk states succinctly what most poets believe: "Ideas are always wrong." This conviction helps account for the uneasy place of artists in the academy, the home of ideas. William Carlos Williams formulated the only resolution that is fully acceptable from an artist's point of view: "No ideas but in things." Generalizations are impermissible unless they emerge before our eyes from specifics, from concrete evidence, from things.

A tendency to violate Williams's rule is what for artists makes an enemy of philosophy; philosophy can forsake too easily the details of experience. Aesthetics is a distrusted discipline in the studio because it seems inevitably to lead away from the works of art produced there. Relatedly, the discipline of aesthetics seems to artists to inhibit creation; many writers and painters have demonstrated that thinking long about what art is or ought to be ruins the power to write or paint. There are, for example, the notorious instances of Tolstoy denouncing, on the basis of high-sounding principles, his own novels, not to mention Shakespeare's plays, and of Coleridge becoming so fascinated by abstractions that it was increasingly impossible for him to write poetry.

We all have to risk thinking, however, if our efforts are to

have any shape at all, and like others in the arts I find myself thinking about the word *Beauty*. What follows is an attempt to define it as it applies to photography.

At the outset, though, I need to raise a warning: my position is based on some beliefs that I would not for a moment try to debate, not because they are irrational but because they are unprovable. The job of the photographer, in my view, is not to catalogue indisputable fact but to try to be coherent about intuition and hope. This is not to say that he is unconcerned with the truth.

Aesthetics is usually defined as "a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of the beautiful and with judgments concerning beauty." I recall the endurance it took when I was a student to complete an aesthetics course based on that definition. *Beauty* seemed to me then an obsolete word, appropriate to urns and the dead inside them; what had the term to do with the realities of this century?

I have since learned, however, that the word *beauty* is in practice unavoidable. Its very centrality accounts, in fact, for my decision to photograph. There appeared a quality — *Beauty* seemed the only appropriate word for it — in certain photographs and paintings that opened my eyes, and I was compelled to learn to live with the vocabulary of this new sight, though for many years I still found it embarrassing to use the word *Beauty*, even while believing in it.

If the proper goal of art is, as I now believe, *Beauty*, the *Beauty* that concerns me is that of *Form*. *Beauty* is, in my view, a synonym for the coherence and structure underlying life (not for nothing does Aristotle list plot first in his enumeration of the components of tragedy, a genre of literature that, at least in its classical form, affirms order in life). *Beauty* is the overriding demonstration of pattern that one observes, for example, in the plays of Sophocles and

Shakespeare, the fiction of Joyce, the films of Ozu, the paintings of Cézanne and Matisse and Hopper, and the photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, and Dorothea Lange.

Why is *Form* beautiful? Because, I think, it helps us meet our worst fear, the suspicion that life may be chaos and that therefore our suffering is without meaning. James Dickey was right when he asked rhetorically, "What is Heaven, anyway, but the power of dwelling among objects and actions of consequence." "Objects of consequence" cannot be created by man alone, nor can "actions of consequence" happen in a void; they can only be found within a framework that is larger than we are, an encompassing totality invulnerable to our worst behavior and most corrosive anxieties.

Art's *beauty* does not lead, of course, to narrow doctrine. The *Form* it affirms is not neatly finished, at least to our eyes. It does not lead directly to a theology or a system of ethics (though it reminds me of the wisdom of humility and generosity). William Carlos Williams said that poets write for a single reason — to give witness to *splendor* (a word also used by Thomas Aquinas in defining the beautiful). It is a useful word, especially for a photographer, because it implies light — light of overwhelming intensity. The *Form* toward which art points is of an incontrovertible brilliance, but it is also far too intense to examine directly. We are compelled to understand *Form* by its fragmentary reflection in the daily objects around us; art will never fully define light.

How, more specifically, does art reveal *Beauty*, or *Form*? Like philosophy it abstracts. Art simplifies. It is never exactly equal to life. In the visual arts, this careful sorting out in favor of order is called composition, and most artists know its primacy. An assistant of Ozu's remembers, for example, that during the making of the film *Late Autumn*

there was this table with beer bottles and some dishes and an ashtray on it, and we had shot the scene from one side and were going to shoot it from the other side, when Ozu came up and began shifting the objects around. I was so shocked that I said that if he did that he would create a bad break in continuity, that everyone would notice that the beer bottles were not on the right and the ashtray on the left. He stopped, looked at me, and said: "Continuity? Oh, that. No, you're wrong. People never notice things like that — and this way it makes a much better composition." And he was right, of course. People don't. When I saw the rushes I didn't notice anything wrong with those scenes.

Art takes liberties, then, to reveal shape.

As we have observed, however, the abstractions of art are different from those of philosophy in being constructed of specifics, concrete examples that are believable as individual facts, or strongly seem so. (Aristotle pointed out that the strength these specifics add is that usually we can test them by our own experience, in terms of probability.) Photography, more than any other art, is tied to this use of specifics. With a camera, one has to love individual cases. A photographer can describe a better world only by better seeing the world as it is in front of him. Invention in photography is so laborious as to be in most instances perverse. Edward Weston wrote in his daybooks that he started to photograph as a result of his "amazement at subject matter"; I doubt that any great photographer ever starts because of amazement over his camera or over a particular photographic process. He has to love these, too, but it is not with them that his fundamental dedication as an artist begins. The name of the group to which Weston briefly belonged, "f64," captures well this primary commitment to things (f64 is the smallest

aperture available on most view camera lenses; by its use the depth of focus is maximized, and the most precise possible rendering of detail is achieved).

If the goal of art is Beauty and if we assume that the goal is sometimes reached, even if always imperfectly, how do we judge art? Basically, I think, by whether it reveals to us important Form that we ourselves have experienced but to which we have not paid adequate attention. Successful art *rediscovers* Beauty for us.

One standard, then, for the evaluation of art is the degree to which it gives us a fresh intimation of Form. For a picture to be beautiful it does not have to be shocking, but it must in some significant respect be unlike what has preceded it (this is why an artist cannot afford to be ignorant of the tradition within his medium). If the dead end of the romantic vision is incoherence, the failure of classicism, which is the outlook I am defending, is the cliché, the ten thousandth camera-club imitation of a picture by Ansel Adams.

The beauty of a work of art can also be judged by its scope. The greatest beauty tends to encompass most; the artworks of largest importance frequently have within them the widest diversity. A. R. Ammons phrased this well in the poem *Sphere*, in which he observed that "the shapes nearest shapelessness awe us most, suggest the god." This is so, I think, because most of life seems shapeless most of the time, and the art that squares with this powerful impression seems most convincingly to confront disagreeable fact. Thus, for example, while Charles Sheeler's photograph of an ore car at the Ford River Rouge plant is unquestionably beautiful, its beauty is of a lesser sort than that found in some of the formally rougher but more complexly human photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

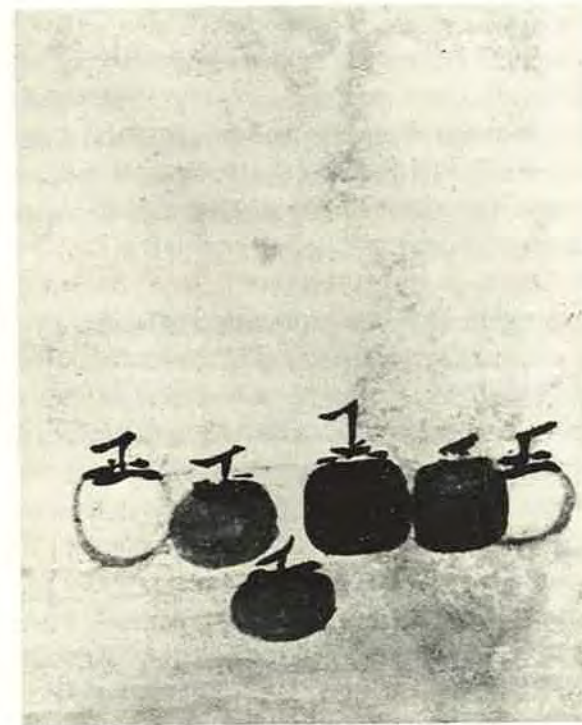
There are, of course, wonderful exceptions to this rule,

though they are perhaps more apparent exceptions than real ones. Bell peppers would seem to be about as limited as any subject matter could be, but in fact how unlimited they are when photographed by Weston.

Finally, I think the success of a work of art can be measured not only by its freshness and the diversity of the elements it reconciles, but also by the apparent ease of its execution. An artwork should not appear to have been hard work. I emphasize "appear" because certainly no artwork is easy to make; Mu Ch'i's renowned ink drawing *The Six Persimmons* (Plate II) may have been completed in seconds, but the study and control beneath its freedom are known to anyone who has tried something similar; hundreds, maybe thousands, of attempted persimmons preceded those faultless six.

Mu Ch'i's picture is unforgettable, nonetheless, at least in part, because it looks as if it had been effortlessly done. The same is true of photographs; they seem to validate the self-effacing observation of the combat photographer Kyoichi Sawada: "If you're there, you get good photographs." The pictures Sawada made convince us of this; had we been in Vietnam, we too could have taken the pictures he did, the ones that brought him a Pulitzer Prize. Stated another way, luck seems to be a large part of good picture making, and not just in combat photography. If we had been at the old church that evening in Hernandez as the moon came up, we could surely have gotten a picture at least something like the one Ansel Adams made. Or so, in the presence of that and other fine pictures, we are deceived to think.

To remind ourselves of the significance of grace in photography — of the importance of seeming to do the job easily — we need only to examine a copy of a mass-circulation photography magazine. Most of the pictures



II Mu-Ch'i (active 1200-1250), *The Six Persimmons* (ink on paper)

suggest embarrassing strain: odd angles, extreme lenses, and eccentric darkroom techniques reveal a struggle to substitute shock and technology for sight. How many photographers of importance, after all, have relied on long telephoto lenses? Instead their work is usually marked by an economy of means, an apparently everyday sort of relationship with their subject matter.

Why do most great pictures look uncontrived? Why do photographers bother with the deception, especially since it so often requires the hardest work of all? The answer is, I think, that the deception is necessary if the goal of art is to be reached: only pictures that look as if they had been easily made can convincingly suggest that Beauty is commonplace.

Before going on with this exploration of Beauty in photography I would like to pause, in anticipation of objection, to consider whether such a definition of Beauty does not rule out most twentieth-century painting and sculpture. If so, how parochial can we photographers be?

The Form I have equated with Beauty — that is, the order in art that mirrors the order in the Creation itself — has not, plainly, been as consistently the subject of the art of this century as it was, for example, during the Middle Ages. Some of what in our time we have called art has been concerned solely and finally, I believe, with perceptual form, that is, form completely free of any conceptual content, form purely of ordered sensation; the pleasures we associate with it are exclusively those of color and shape and texture. Setting aside the artists' intent, works by Josef Albers, Jackson Pollock, and Frank Stella are conspicuous examples. Insofar as art has occupied itself in this fashion, it seems to offer real but minor pleasures, the joys of decoration. All ages have rightly valued decoration — it is not exclusively our obses-

sion — and in moderation it does not imply decadence. Moderation, though, is the test that seems to undo us.

We must be careful, nonetheless, with what we categorize as solely decorative. Some twentieth-century art seems at first to offer only perceptual rewards, but later reveals a rich ambiguity. Sculptor David Smith's *Cubi* and *Zig* series (Plate IV), for example, do imply, by ways I cannot explain, the splendor of which William Carlos Williams spoke; these great works of abstract sculpture are more than pleasant, deeper than the entertaining patterns of accident or play.

In short, a revelation of Beauty/Form is as open to painting and sculpture as it is to photography. This is so because a successful reflection of Form is not necessarily antithetical to the tendency of painting and sculpture to a greater degree of abstraction. Extreme literalness is not essential; Andrew Wyeth's realism often points nowhere, in my experience, but Arthur Dove's abstract landscapes suggest a great deal. The painters who have been most successful do seem to occupy a middle ground, though that can range from Edward Hopper's representational paintings and the semirepresentational work of Georgia O'Keeffe and Milton Avery to the nearly total abstractions of Ellsworth Kelly.

To return to photography, the large number of memorable pictures in photography's century and a half of history raises an issue. Are all important pictures beautiful? For instance, there is Robert Capa's photograph of a Spanish loyalist, fatally wounded a moment earlier, falling to the side of the 35-mm. frame (Plate V). It is as vivid a synopsis of violent death as has been produced in our century. But is it beautiful?

Someone might conceivably argue that in purely perceptual terms, judged solely as a composition, the photograph is a pleasing assemblage of shapes. To defend the picture on

these grounds alone, however, is a distortion; it is to deny the overwhelming, primary importance of the subject matter. The point is that the falling object is a man.

What Capa's photograph shows is a truth — a common, terrible, and therefore important truth. But again, does this mean the picture is beautiful? Is Truth Beauty and vice versa? The answer, as Keats knew, depends on the truth about which we are talking. For a truth to be beautiful, it must be complete, the full and final Truth. And that, in turn, leads me to a definition of Beauty linked unavoidably to belief. For me, the truth of Capa's picture is limited; it deserves, therefore, some lesser adjective than "beautiful," some word suggesting the partial truths occasionally recorded by heroic journalists.

Significant photographs are not then necessarily beautiful. There are many important pictures that do not contain the full Truth, that do not reveal Form, that do not show us coherence in its deepest sense. Examples, ones that are nonetheless among the most powerful pictures I know, include Daido Moriyama's *Stray Dog* (which about does it for dog pictures) (Plate III), Jacob Riis's terrifying view of a blind beggar and the world in which he must survive (Plate VI), and Diane Arbus's portrait of a sword swallower (Plate VII).

As these photographs begin to suggest, it is even possible for a picture to be strongly, classically composed and still not convey the final truths that are crucial to Form and thus to Beauty. Often, however, composition is a major way for a photographer to show the wholeness of life; the structure of an entire picture can suggest the Form that is Beauty. Such photographs bring to mind Matisse's remarks about the word "expression":

Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is

expressive: the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.

Milton Avery's wife offered a telling description of her husband's work: "The object of the painting was a series of relationships of form and color in which nature was the binding force. Milton's interest was in order, like the high order in nature in which everything worked." I would include among the photographs in which everything works Alfred Stieglitz's *Evening, New York from the Shelton* (Plate VIII), Nick Nixon's portrait of his wife and her sisters in 1975 (Plate IX), and Timothy H. O'Sullivan's *Soda Lake* (Plate XIV).

Though I have just stressed the formal qualities of these pictures, their beauty is not, to repeat, solely a matter of related shapes. Beauty is, at least in part, always tied to subject matter. A photographer can even reflect Form and at the same time pay relatively less attention to composition than did the photographers responsible for the preceding examples. It is possible to reveal Beauty simply by calling the viewer's attention to a human face, as Edward Curtis did in his portrait of Chief Joseph (Plate X), or by showing relationships among people, as Ben Shahn did in his picture of men discussing politics (Plate XI), or even by just pointing out objects with which we live or by which we express ourselves, as Dorothea Lange did in her record of a sign by the air pump in a small gas station (Plate XII). In these subjects there is incontrovertible evidence of Form, and the function that composition serves is subordinate, though essential, to focus our attention on the subject.

Though I have been trying to define *Beauty* so that the word can be of some use, I also believe that certain pictures, very great ones, are too large for categories, too grand for yes or no. Is Lange's *Migrant Mother* an instance of defeat or of determination? Is Shahn's *Strawberry Picker's Child* (Plate

XIII) a case of pointless social waste, or is she holy? Perhaps because in these pictures a sense of possibility is so precariously but tenaciously held, I find them beautiful, sometimes the most beautiful of all.

I want to raise another question about Beauty, a question mature persons can perhaps answer easily, but one that troubled me when I was young: if Beauty and art are as I have described them, are they by themselves enough? Is art a sufficient consolation for life? Can Beauty make suffering tolerable?

The fact is, I think, that they are only partly sufficient. If we are not too burdened by disappointment or loneliness or pain, there are certainly times when art can help; there are moments when great pictures can heal. Views by Masaccio and Rembrandt and Cézanne and Stieglitz, among others, have all been important to me in this way.

On some occasions, however, Beauty, whether in nature or mirrored in art, can itself be painful. I have walked in the mountains on clear winter afternoons when the landscape I discovered in the camera's finder was, in its spectacular independence of us, frightening; I have also come on city tract houses so inhumanly beautiful that they had over them the chill of empty space. It would be misleading not to acknowledge that on certain of these occasions I have had to pack my camera and leave. Sometimes it has been enough to search out a cafe blessed with a jukebox, rattling dishes, and human voices. Family and friends are better though. What a relief there is in an anecdote, a jumping dog, or the brush of a hand. All these things are disorderly, but no plan for survival stands a chance without them.

In conclusion, I would like to turn to a current issue. If photography can reveal to us not only Truth but Beauty, it is

certainly unnecessary to explain further an affection for it; nonetheless, one may speculate about the suddenly widespread interest in it. Photography has, after all, been with us now a long while, and until recently those who thought of it as an art were a small minority.

Fashion and commerce surely account for some of the sudden change; buy this or that camera, invest in this or that print. Related to these considerations but more serious is the fact that painting has temporarily forsaken its historic concerns, allowing photography to take them up (there is no reason painting cannot circle back to its previous position of importance, assuming painters and dealers rid themselves of their mania for showy novelty in technique). Photography's abrupt rise also has to do, I suspect, with our distrust of language; the true outlines of wars and other barbarities have recently been obscured to an unusual degree by talk; maybe, we hope, we can find the Truth by just looking.

Among additional and perhaps related reasons for our increased attention to photography is the withering away of literary possibilities. Drama and fiction used to be prime reflections of Form, of structure in events. They told a story, and the story, if we believed it (if we thought it probable), reminded us of an often painful but nonetheless reassuring order in life. Now, sadly, only certain kinds of stories seem to match our experience; they are to our distress the stories that deny any redemptive pattern. Experience seems to validate stories with unearned, arbitrary endings, ones like automobile accidents and disease. The only other stories we find ourselves able to accept are ones about events so routine and therefore undeniably probable that they are also banal. But to what Beauty does the absurdity of death by car accident testify, and to what splendor does banality point? There have been solutions to these questions, and they have made important reading (one thinks of Camus

and Joyce), but they have not proved to be solutions on which a great many interesting variations can be based.

Theodore Roethke wrote in his notebooks, "I wish I could find an event that meant as much as simple seeing." Had he been able he might have become a dramatist or a novelist. Because he could not discover such an event, he became a poet, a describer of things, a recorder of Form independent of stories, an ally of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who observed that "Beauty is the universal seen."



III Daido Moriyama, *Stray Dog*, 1971



IV David Smith, *Cubi XVII*, 1963 (stainless steel)



V Robert Capa, *Spain*, 1936



VI Jacob Riis, *Blind Beggar*, 1888



VII Diane Arbus, *Albino Sword Swallower at a Carnival, Maryland*, 1970



VIII Alfred Stieglitz, *Evening, New York from the Shelton*, 1931



IX Nicholas Nixon, Heather Brown McCann, Mimi Brown, Bebe Brown Nixon, and Laurie Brown, *New Canaan, Connecticut*, 1975



X Edward S. Curtis, *Chief Joseph of the Nez Percé*, 1903 (photogravure)



XI Ben Shahn, *Talking Politics before Dinner at Wheat-harvest Time: Central Ohio*, 1938



XII Dorothea Lange, *Kern County, California*, 1938



XIII Ben Shahn, *Strawberry Pickers' Child*; Louisiana, 1935



XIV Timothy H. O'Sullivan, *Soda Lake, Carson Desert*, 1867

CIVILIZING CRITICISM
