

RECONCILIATIONS WITH GEOGRAPHY

Minor White
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MINOR WHITE believed that photography was a way to know, and might even have agreed with Henry Miller, who said that art would die away when we all had learned enough. White's fundamental conviction that good photographs have to match up accurately with life is incontrovertible. We need only cite as evidence the fact that nobody can talk someone else into liking a picture. That just happens, suddenly one morning or slowly over a season, when a picture or the recollection of it aligns with the person's experience.

That in any case is how I came to value certain of White's landscapes. I lived on the Oregon coast next to a spectacular, often fog-shrouded headland; on clear days I could see from its summit across fields of salal, down hundreds of feet of rock, and finally out over the ocean. It was like parts of the Bay Area coast, and I began to understand, far from museums and art magazines, just how reverently White had paid attention to what he saw in California.

It was White's gift to understand passionately the limits of documentary photography narrowly defined. "The objectivity of the camera, used wrongly," he observed, "is the very devil." He knew that great pictures cannot be just about

particular landscapes; they have to direct us to more, even eventually to the whole of life. If they do not, then "the documentary photograph, the literal image, is the ultimate illusion."

White's choice of the ocean as a subject was for him exactly right. Its appearance, closely observed, is hypnotic; who can be uninterested in so delicate a light, or the power of waves on rock, or the immensity of the whole view? White's pictures come to more, however, than just these geographic facts, as anyone who has walked the beach almost knows they must. The ocean, by virtue of its size and apparent emptiness, invites attention outward from our petty landscapes, away from ourselves (White said once that he was "appalled by the image of his inner landscape"). The sea is too vast to understand and too awesome to avoid; it attracts us as it offers a final liberation from human scale. All this coincided richly with White's understanding of art as metaphor, as a suggestion of similarities between the known and the barely known.

If it was White's achievement to show us that photographs can point beyond themselves, it was his fate as a human being, limited like the rest of us, sometimes to fail. But, because his goals were major, the failures are not entirely failures; they have value as they are instructive. White, who was a fully committed teacher, would surely have told us to use whichever of his pictures might help.

One can begin by noting that White himself sensed a potential problem in what he wanted to do. He observed hopefully, referring to some of his own work, that "the spring-tight line between reality and photograph has been stretched relentlessly, but it has not been broken. These abstractions of nature have not left the world of appearances; for to do so is to break the camera's strongest point — its authenticity." At his best, White made pictures

that were strong because of that authenticity, the appearance of the world. When he failed, it was because he tried to escape it, to travel to what e. e. cummings sardonically called a "hell of a good universe next door." Because we all have wanted to make that trip, in sheer weariness with home, we can sympathize, but, because there is no hope of reaching such a destination short of death, we are obliged to resist it.

The problem of an art in flight from the world of appearances was not uniquely White's. I would trade all of Stieglitz's pictures of blurry night clouds for one of his sharply focused views of the sky in daylight, one of those in which he customarily nicked in some solidifying foliage from the ground where we walk. The same issue, in slightly different form, has always plagued fiction; writers struggle against the temptation to write allegory, airy stuff where characters walk stiffly around wearing signs, instead of slouching ambiguously past like our neighbors, and only afterward coming to represent more than just themselves. It is the strength of art over allegory that it is more like life; in art as in life, abstractions and truths of the spirit reach us only as they are embodied in believable specifics, in recognizable particulars, what William Carlos Williams identified succinctly as "things."

For things to be credible in photographs requires, I think, that there be an indication of the subject's actual size. White, however, turned away from literal geography when he made landscapes that omit an indication of scale. The pictures range from what I presume might be medium shots to close-ups, but the practice in all of them is so thoroughly to deny the viewer clues to size that the difference does not matter. We cannot grasp with certainty whether the literal geography is composed of sand or gravel, whether a view is an aerial or an examination of disintegrating plaster (Plate XVIII).



XVIII Minor White, *Wall, Santa Fe, New Mexico*, 1966



XIX Minor White, *Pacific, Devil's Slide*, 1947

Why did White do this? I sense, when the practice is considered together with the narrow range of his subject matter, a struggle with the world of appearances that must have at times been extreme, and from which escape must have been attractive. I can also appreciate that the formulation of landscapes without scale might have seemed to him an appropriate pedagogical tactic for leading students to look at life, however ironically counterproductive it seems to me. If the whole of creation can be found in its smallest fragment, why not try to suggest this by withholding indications of scale? In fact, why not try positively to upset our preconceptions about size, as he did in some of the pictures he made in Utah, in which he radically combined what was close and far.

The erasure of identifiable scale is augmented by other practices that discourage viewers from knowing what the literal subjects of the pictures are. Even in the sequence of coastal pictures, "Song without Words" (Plate XIX), White chose to upend one of the seascapes so that we are compelled to perceive it first as pure shape. His relegation of captions to the end of *mirrors messages manifestations*, a large book, effectively forces us to encounter many of the pictures as abstractions. (One of the captions — "Bullet Holes, Capitol Reef, Utah" — transforms a rich but puzzling photograph into a great one. With the caption we see at once two subjects, the damage by gunfire, and a constellation of stars; in what other picture is our disgust arrested so sharply by wonder?)

White did make beautiful landscapes that are nearly unidentifiable. They are, though, never wholly cut away from the recognizable world. I think particularly of the calligraphic reflection in water above a dam, and of the bird-shaped shadow on a white canyon wall. In these photographs the setting requires a moment's study to identify, but

it can be done. And once done, we can look again at the calligraphy or bird and feel the astonishment that White intended us to feel; how extraordinary the commonplace world can be — miracles can come from it. But again, the context is essential; miracles alone, without the norm, are not really miracles at all. Without the setting of the identifiable world we are unconvinced of White's transcendental truths because we are not allowed to experience the conditions of their discovery.

The question of how close a photograph ought to stick to the outward appearance of life, even when describing miracles, is not necessarily best answered by the literal minded. Aristotle argued that it was legitimate for playwrights to include probable improbabilities, things that were unbelievable except within a playwright's imaginary world onstage, provided that the overall production revealed truths about life as we experience it offstage. The general success of White's infrared landscapes can be understood on these grounds.

My favorite of White's infrared pictures is the one of poplars along a road near Dansville, New York. In the brilliant leaves there is a discovery: many trees, though they are in fact usually dark, appear to be full of light, perhaps because the leaves, especially poplar leaves and especially in the wind, reflect it. In any case, when I look at the picture I think of Williams's beautiful line, "there is a bird in the poplars — it is the sun!" White's metaphor is simpler — there is light *in* the poplars, it is the sun — but it is a likeness that is in its visual expression just as lovely.

I have said that certain of White's landscapes seem to me unsuccessful because they fail to convey a clear indication of scale and are thus not identifiably of the world we know. It can be argued that in this I am simply rejecting the Roman-

tic vision and that it is unprofitable to dispute matters of belief. This is probably true, but it seems necessary to try to contest the point because the abstractions come to a closed landscape where, lost in our private dreams, we can no longer communicate. Sooner or later we have to ask of all pictures what kind of life they promote, and some of these views suggest to me a frightening alienation from the world of appearances.

The beauty of the seascapes offers an alternative. White's goal with them was presumably the same — to convey a sense of the mysterious, limitless nature of the Creation — but they, unlike the abstractions, also convey peace. It is a calm defined through metaphor: oceanic scale is the scale of eternity. Such a testament is itself baffling, but we are encouraged to try to understand it by its provision of a place to begin. We can, as White did, walk the shore.