

P · H · O · T · O

C O M M U N I Q U E



Ed Burtynsky; *Lettuce, Holland Marsh, 1982*

Suggested Lyrics
The Romance of Doom
Photographs by Tony Mendoza



above: Dorothea Lange; *Family Farmstead, Nebraska, 1940* below: *Family on the Road, Oklahoma, 1938*

Dorothea Lange: ***Photographs of*** ***a Lifetime***

An Aperture Monograph,
Aperture, Inc.,
Millerton, New York, 1982;
182 pp.; hardcover, \$40

Dorothea Lange: *Photographs of a Lifetime* is a book with impeccable credentials. Lange's place in twentieth-century photography is acknowledged without question; the book, an Aperture mono-



graph, draws on the huge Lange archive at the Oakland (California) Museum; the photographs were reprinted from the original negatives specifically for this project (with duotone negatives made by the incredibly skilled Richard Benson) and are presented along

with excerpts from Lange's own writings; the introductory essay is by Robert Coles.

One rather naturally, then, expects a great deal — perhaps too much. But in important respects the book falls short of its potential. Robert Coles' essay, although engaging and well-written, is somewhat diffuse and rambling and Coles includes far too much material from his own life and work, particularly in dealing with the issues of social investigation, the meaning of documentary and the purpose of reportage. His remarks are interesting, especially when he writes about the self-perceptions of those being documented, but they are not always relevant. And there is virtually no examination of

the central issue of *why* Lange's photographs communicate so effectively. These are, after all, *images*; Lange was possessed of remarkable gifts as a *photographer*; it isn't accurate or fair not to examine her work to at least some extent in visual terms. Lange's success was not simply due to the Great Depression and her natural instincts toward the people affected by it. She was also an artist with a thorough understanding of the expressive qualities of posture, gesture, expression and position as the real revealers of a personality or clues to a situation or an event. Her ability to use these elements to make great photographs remains her central achievement, particularly in an era cluttered with meaning-

less "documentary" images, and is far more important than many of the aspects of her career to which Coles devotes so much space.

The actual selection of photographs draws very heavily on the work reproduced in the Museum of Modern Art's 1966 volume, *Dorothea Lange*, published to accompany a major Lange retrospective; unfortunately, there are some problems here as well. The Aperture book contains sixty-three of the eighty-eight images in the earlier monograph, often in the same order; for the most part these are the best known of Lange's photographs. Although this book includes 112 large plates and many smaller reproductions, providing interesting material for a comparison of Lange's treatment of the same or different subjects, there is a strong emphasis on her documentary work to the exclusion of her early portraiture and some later, more personal images. So while there is additional work, better reproduced here, the Museum of Modern Art's much more modest publication is more truly representative. This is ironic, for obviously a great deal of research, care and effort has gone into the current volume. This effort has produced a fine book but not a definitive one; and *Photographs of a Lifetime* is not really an appropriate title given the omissions and duplications mentioned above.

Don Snyder

**Women of Vision:
Photographic Statements
by Twenty Women
Photographers**

Dorothy Norman, ed.,
The Unicorn Publishing
House, New Jersey, 1982.
128 pp., volume \$19.95

Photography is one field in which women have made their mark from an early period. It is only in the past decade, however, in the wake of the feminist movement, that they

have won recognition for their contribution. In the United States collections have appeared like *Revolution: Ten Women of Photography*, as well as monographs on individual practitioners like Gertrude Kasebier and contemporary portraitist Judy Dorn. In Canada the National Film Board issued *The Female Eye* in 1975 as a tribute to International Women's Year.

Now *Women of Vision* joins the growing list of such publications. It presents work by twenty New York City women photographers, some of them widely known, such as Barbara Morgan and Ruth Okun, others with more limited reputations.

There are some fine individual images scattered through the book, including a series of evocative portraits of women by Kathryn Alder and Frances McLaughlin-Gill, who are well known themselves. Yet as a whole *Women of Vision* suffers the same weakness as many group shows or anthologies — a lack of unity. It is not only that the work ranges from black and white nature photography to National Geographic-style colour travel photographs but also that, in many cases, there is no coherence within the five images devoted to each photographer.

Moreover, the selection is itself a sometimes questionable. Leda Meier, for instance, whose documentary photographs of Quebec were published in 1981 in a handsome book entitled *Quebec en 1981 de 1980*, is represented by a group of midlife portraits. Nor does the choice of Eva Rubinstein's photographs do her justice.

The editor of *Women of Vision*, Dorothy Norman, whose work is also featured in the volume, claims that the leading theme is affirmation of the fullness of life. And many of the photographers echo that sentiment in the statements which precede their pictures, along with brief biographies. Yet this theme of celebration could be applied equally well to the work of many, many male photog-

raphers. I would tend to agree with photographer Bill Brandt, who said, "You can't tell the sex of the photographer by the photograph." And I would have to conclude that there is really no valid reason for the disparate work of these women photographers to be assembled under one cover.

Lois Alter

**Wright Morris:
Photographs & Words**

James Alinder, ed.,
The Friends of Photography,
Carmel, California, 1982;
120 pp.; 61 black and white
photographs; hardcover,
\$32.50

Wright Morris' mastery of the writer's craft should come as no surprise since he has published some thirty books since 1942. Nonetheless, it is refreshing to open a photography book and find a paragraph like the following, which introduces his essay "Photography in My Life" at the beginning of Wright Morris: *Photographs & Words*:

In October of 1933 my room on Florianigasse in Vienna looked out on a small garden where the blind came to walk. When my bedding was aired at the casement in the morning I would lean out and observe them. They walked in pairs, stiffly erect, marching slowly to an unheard music. It shamed me to spy on them in this manner, but I was young, each hour seemed precious and I was eager to be one of those on whom nothing was lost. To hold fast to what might escape me, what I needed (I thought) was a camera.

This sense of refreshment, or enjoyment, or simple appreciation for a well-made sentence, continues as one reads the essay's remaining forty pages. Morris shares freely his years and experiences as a writer and photographer: happenings, discoveries and travels in pursuit of material for words

or images and the implicit search for a deeper understanding of self and fellow beings are set down directly and in a specific relation to the photographs that follow. And having allowed us to observe him, Morris concludes "Photography in My Life" with some observations on the medium itself that are also worth quoting:

The dawn of consciousness may be the dawn of time as perceived by man. From that first moment of awareness man has sought a piece of time's living substance, an arrested moment that would authenticate time's existence. Not the ruin of time, nor the tombs of time, but the eternal present in time's every moment. From this spinning reel of time the camera snips a sampling of the living tissue, along with the distortions, the illusions and the lies, a specimen of the truth. . . .

However varying their points of view, all photographers share the common field of vision that the mind's eye, and the camera's eye, has imposed on this century. Quite beyond the telling of it, as well as the seeing of it, exceeding both our criticism and our appreciation, the camera's eye combines how we see with whatever is there to be seen. What it has in mind for us may not at all be what we have in mind for ourselves.

The images contained in Wright Morris: *Photographs & Words* are as much a source of pleasure as Morris' writing. The book reproduces sixty-one photographs Morris made between 1938 and 1950, more than half of which were made in Nebraska during his visits to the areas of the plains where he grew up. The best of these photographs combine involvement, nostalgia and an autobiographical sensibility with a wonderful directness and clarity. "Uncle Harry, Home Place", "Straightback Chair, Home Place", "Farmhouse near Mc-

Cook, Nebraska", "Light Pole and Grain Elevator, Nebraska" and "Bedroom and Washstand, Southern Indiana", for example, give the viewer renewed faith in the pictorial qualities of simplicity, balance and economy of means without in the least sacrificing the subjective elements of intuition, understanding and absorption. The pictures are spare and evocative; one looks at them for long periods of time.

No book is perfect: Morris occasionally congratulates himself in the text; the reproductions are slightly hard-edged and the paper slightly too shiny for the subject matter; one could argue that Walker Evans and Paul Strand took the same kinds of subjects to greater heights or that Morris himself achieved a stronger blend of image and text in the earlier *The Inhabitants*, *The Home Place* or *God's Country and My People*. These points should be acknowledged but there isn't much need to dwell on them. If you enjoy good writing, are interested in times and places not so distant in years or miles but hard to locate in the present world and enjoy unembellished, straightforward photography, this book brings many rewards.

Don Snyder

Denis Charnay: Expeditionary Photographer

Kath F. Davis,
The University of New
Mexico Press, Albuquerque,
1980, 212 pp.,
120 photographs,
hardcover \$19.95

Denis Charnay (1828-1913), the photographer of Mexican ruins in the late 1850s, should be a familiar name to historians of both photography and anthropology. He led such a romantic and sometimes public life that it is difficult to believe his adventures as an explorer and photographer in Mexico, Madagascar, Australia and Java have not been previously surveyed in a



Ruth Orkin, Ethel Waters, Carson McCullers, Julie Harris, review on page 36.

monograph or turned into a movie. Keith Davis' exemplary study of Charnay's photographic career thus fills a need for a contemporary appraisal of Charnay's importance to the history of photography, anthropology and archeology.

Davis, a 1979 graduate of the University of New Mexico's master's program, was able to see his research on Charnay progress from a graduate paper begun in 1978 for a course taught by Beaumont Newhall to this thoroughly researched book. The search back through history for Charnay's origins and life also took the author to Paris where he studied the original negatives and prints. Many of the reproductions in this photo-book are modern prints from the original glass negatives preserved by the Musée de l'Homme. Davis at the time of publication was curator of Harkness Collections in Kansas City, Missouri.

Charnay's life was difficult to document fully, a lot of an irony for a man who sought public acclaim, but not unusual for a photographer. Born in France, he became a teacher and found employment in

New Orleans in 1850. Discovering the writings of John Lloyd Stephens, the first American to explore the pre-Columbian ruins in Mexico and Guatemala, Charnay set out to become an explorer himself. He sailed back to France and secured the sponsorship of the Minister of Public Instruction for an expedition to Yucatan.

Leaving Paris in April 1857, he made an eight-month detour through the United States where he photographed along the St. Lawrence, including a scene or two on the Canadian side. Working his way south down the Mississippi River he reached Veracruz in late November 1857. Remaining in Mexico City he read and learned Spanish while at the same time planning his expedition to Yucatan. The Mexican civil war naturally made decisive plans impossible or hopelessly compromised. On the first stage of his journey in 1858-59 he lost his photographic equipment for almost half a year and had to make do with whatever materials he could muster locally.

While Charnay appears to have remained alert from or

cautions of Mexican politics on his first trip, his next voyage there in 1864 with troops sent by France to support Maximilian was by implication political though the photographer's role is not unknown. This second Mexican visit had followed an official French expedition to Madagascar in 1863 for which Charnay served as photographer and writer. The nature of this African voyage was political and some of Charnay's portraits reflect this, while others show evidence of a primitive anthropological methodology.

Following Maximilian's execution in 1867, the photographer headed back to the U.S. where he remained until 1870. No information was uncovered by Davis for this period, but in 1875 Charnay visited Brazil, Chile and Argentina and published a book about his travels; he took no photographs.

The 1878-79 expedition to Java and Australia was a minor but significant collecting voyage sponsored by an agency of the French government. He took a few dozen photographs and upon his return to

at a distance making photographs of a someone that defies her excitement in the music. The series is a new mix, salvaged only by the presence of guitars, and the impressive completeness of her musical inventory.

While discussions of her selected essays are useful in evaluating her work, they do not do justice to the content of her book which is a varied collection of memorabilia. Her most absorbing was plentiful and her character portraits of celebrities, chiefly actors, fill out her story. There are all five, moving back criteria of conduct, humour and warmth, all the stuff that Life was full of. Humphrey Bogart is accounted for, Montgomery Clift is there as is Orson Welles, bridging the gap to the present. Alfred Hitchcock and Albert Einstein who share a double-page spread. There is a nod to Robert Capa. Orkin gives proof of her ease among the greats. She includes a por-

trait of herself by Eisenstein.

On the dust jacket we see a beautiful young girl in her twenties, heavily running the gamut of an all-male chorus of guitars, commentary and well whistles on a European street. Made in 1951, the shot was a partial set-up, a catch lead to a story on travel abroad. Reincarnate in 1981, the image serves as a symbolic introduction to Ruth Orkin's autobiography. With understandable pride, she tells her story of breaking into the business. She gathers together a body of work whose component images are qualitatively the equal of most of what we now call photojournalism. Her successes are modestly presented and frequently undefined in the captions of the story. Something is missing, though, both from her chronicle and from her pictures. It is something large and subtle, something that we have no right to expect but do because of Dorothy Lange, Berenice Abbott

and in some ways, Margaret Bourke-White. Each of these women seemed to find a vocation in communication. Each had an informal perception of her times — a sense of history — that deflected the restrictive social structures in which she lived and worked. Ten years after F.S.A., Ruth Orkin found no cause better than her own gallant run against male preconception and no subjects better than the popular glories of her day.

Martha Langford

Jerry N. Uelsmann Twenty-five Years: A Retrospective

James L. Enyeart,
simultaneously published
by Little, Brown and
Company (Canada) Limited;
Little, Brown and Company,
Boston, 1982; 231 pp.;
177 photographs;
hardcover, \$39.95

Jerry N. Uelsmann/Twenty-

five Years: A Retrospective, by James L. Enyeart (a New York Graphic Society book recently published by Little, Brown and Company) is an attractive yet somewhat curious volume. Beautifully produced, with attention to detail throughout, it includes reproductions of 140 Uelsmann photographs dating from 1956 to 1981, with another 34 images accompanying the author's sixty-odd page introduction. In one sense, then, it serves as a valuable anthology of work by a major photographer. In another sense, however, the book seems awkwardly timed and inconclusive: Uelsmann is forty-nine years old, one assumes his career has a significant future and one wonders if it isn't a bit early for a retrospective — especially one that attempts such a definitive essay on the photographer and his work.

This essay provides the usual chronological and critical data as well as making the almost inevitable three-part di-

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vision (early, middle and late) of the work under discussion. It does provide an interesting sample of Uelsmann's early photographic efforts, but these images are eclectic to the point where Uelsmann himself admits that "A little bit of the spirit of all of the silver heroes of the fifties is there. The range is so great . . . that you could prove anything . . . if you want to show how a little of Minor caught my heart, or a little Callahan caught my eye, or Sommer caught my mind. It's all there." With the photographer so frankly admitting "you could prove anything" about the work from his formative years, Enyeart's attempts to use this work to lay a critical foundation for discussion of Uelsmann's more mature photographs come across as laboured and unconvincing.

Once the author starts dealing with Uelsmann's multiple-imagery from 1963 and beyond, the introductory essay becomes more valuable. Enyeart deals

to some extent with the symbolism, recurring motifs and visual patterns that are important hallmarks of the Uelsmann style and manages to use Uelsmann's own observations and writings in a much more appropriate fashion. The choice of 1967-1975 and 1976-1981 as the equivalent of "middle" and "late" periods in Uelsmann's working-life-to-date is curious, however. About the 1967-1975 years, Enyeart writes: "During these eight years Uelsmann received his greatest exposure through exhibition, publication, and honors. His style was now distinct and recognizable. His execution and craftsmanship in photomontage were flawless, and critics began to talk about his work on the basis of his aesthetics, no longer dwelling on his technique." Twenty-five pages later, Enyeart begins the chapter on the 1976-1981 period by observing: "Since 1975 Uelsmann's photography has been increasingly exhibited and published

internationally. . . . A comparison of these [recent] works with those of a decade ago reveals a preponderance of similar motifs and poetic interrelationships. . . . Reviews of Uelsmann's photography since 1975 . . . clearly accept without question Uelsmann's stature as an artist of major influence." This is a rather lame set of distinctions — Enyeart would have been better off not trying to create divisions where they do not naturally exist and concentrating instead on a more thorough, overall critical analysis.

The selection of photographs is generally well balanced. There is a good mixture of work from the earlier books (*Jerry N. Uelsmann*, 1970 and *Silver Meditations*, 1976) along with less familiar and almost unknown images. This mixture helps one trace the evolution of the main Uelsmann themes, symbols and formal structures in a more complete way than either previous volume. The final section of reproductions is particularly effective and here Enyeart talks about the work with considerable cogency:

Among the dominant motifs . . . are . . . floating objects, metamorphosing forms . . . nudes, room interiors, environmental insets, windows and doors, material transmutation, and references to classical antiquity Details that commonly convey these themes are rocks, water, clouds, trees, hands, eyes, mirrors, and flora. . . . Visual and formal devices used to structure the variations include accentuated foreground scale, extreme linear perspective, varied focus, positive-negative reversal, drawing, and collaging.

Uelsmann has used . . . subjective definitions to categorize these broad areas of visual concern, such as the predicament of Man, nature-energy, embedded figures, dream moments, and portraits.

This isn't bad, although it could go further in one impor-

tant respect. Virtually all of Uelsmann's work since 1963 reads from bottom to top, foreground to background and is clearly organized around vertical and horizontal axes that divide the image in halves or thirds. Interior and exterior worlds frequently allude to dreams and reality (in that order); the forces that shape existence behave according to specific laws and in many cases the photographs deal with the earth's surface as a symbolic interface between existences. Things below the earth often exist in latent or potential-energy phases; living things on the earth seem inexorably bound to a cycle of growth and decay; forms or objects which float above the earth seem beyond this temporality of being and beyond the grasp of time and gravity. Although the photographs do not exclude possibility, fantasy and even some kinds of freedom — objects can metamorphose; situations and conditions often change — Uelsmann's world view seems firmly rooted in a system of thought and method of vision that depends on clearly visible themes and principles of organization. It is surprising that Enyeart shows an awareness of these issues in his writing but probes them so little given his thoroughness in dealing with other, less central aspects of this work.

Critical issues aside, one either likes Uelsmann's photography or one doesn't. This book will make few converts of those in the latter category, but for people who do respond to Uelsmann's vision it provides a strong collection of images whether or not one agrees with the retrospective idea and the time-period divisions which form its basis. One could wish for more new imagery and less critical structure, but at the same time cannot help admiring both Uelsmann's still-remarkable dexterity and the elegant production that has long been associated with New York Graphic Society releases.

Don Snyder ◀◀

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