“The most detailed views …”:
Phil Bergerson’s Photographs of America

From: ***An Announcement by Daguerre***

By this process, without any notion of drawing, without any knowledge of chemistry or physics, it will be possible to take in a few minutes the most detailed views, and the most picturesque sites, for the technical means are simple, and require no special knowledge to be used. Only care and a little practice is needed to succeed perfectly.

Everyone, with the help of the Daguerreotype, will make a view of his chateau or his country house: collections of all kinds will be formed of great value, for art can imitate neither the exactness of the pictures nor their perfect detail, and they are rendered unalterable to further effect of light. It will even be possible to make portraits: the movement of the model presents, it is true, some difficulties for complete success.

This important discovery, applicable to all purposes, will not only be of great interest to science, but it will also give a new stimulus to art and far from harming those who practise it, will be of great use to them. . . .

Finally: The Daguerreotype is not an instrument to be used to draw nature, but a chemical and physical process which gives her the ability to reproduce herself.

—Daguerre
Painter, Inventor, and Director of the Diorama
January 1839

Translated from a broadside in the Gabriel Cromer Collection, George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY

“THE MOST DETAILED VIEWS…”:
Phil Bergerson’s Photographs of America

NOTES FROM THE ARCHIVE

Somehow the clock has gone forward by nearly three decades. We are in Phil Bergerson’s basement and there are photographs everywhere. Boxes line the stairs; they are piled on the sofa, coffee table, workbench, and half of an old ping-pong table; they fill cabinets and files and more cabinets against the far wall. There are other, smaller tables off in the distance, with additional boxes and binders on top of and underneath them. The space was built as a game room, or possibly a bar, but now there is barely room for the furnace. All these boxes are full of prints, 16x20 or 20x24 inches, some larger, a few larger still. If this were a storefront, the scene would be a perfect Bergerson photograph.

Bergerson is preparing a donation for Library and Archives Canada, going through selected material before it gets packed up and shipped to Ottawa. As he works, his spontaneous commentary becomes more and more like a single-play podcast, a guide to the evolution of his thinking during so many years of photographing and teaching. The scope of his production is enormous, far greater than anyone would guess without actually seeing this room. Curator David Harris, who provided the introduction to *Shards of America*, expressed it well in his later notes for *American Artifacts*: “[Bergerson’s work] presents America . . . [in] suites of meticulously sequenced, often provocative . . . colour photographs, which read as discrete chapters in a vast, unfinished novel.”

After several visits with Phil, he and I covered most of the years since the project took form. I have pages of notes, and more on a thumb drive, but two of Bergerson’s remarks seem to frame the entire conversation. The first is a question he posed to himself: “What is this medium, and what can I do with it?” The second is his partial answer: “I want to understand the frontal view . . . and orchestrate the same sensation for the viewer.”

1989–90

The 1989–90 academic year was pivotal for Bergerson, then at the midpoint of his teaching career. Ryerson’s programs had assumed a significant presence in the larger, still-growing photographic community; many of his students had already begun their own artistic journeys, and Bergerson’s personal work was

also undergoing a process of change—as it turned out, one that he himself took several years to understand.

The initial signs of this began to manifest themselves in photographs made on visits to London, Cambridge, and Kingston, Ontario, in 1989, including the pivotal *Best Duck*; these were followed by pictures from the 1990 Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, and from a trip to Rochester, New York, in the fall of that year (Figs. 37–41). There is nothing even approximately similar from Bergerson's earlier years of production; his use of the photographic image up until that time had been centered on a nearly relentless investigation of photography's powers of description. But while photographing outside Rochester with his colleague Dave Heath (they had been attending the same conference), Heath suddenly, and bluntly, confronted Bergerson with an entirely new question—how could the elements of a photograph be seen in relationship?

Bergerson spent the next several years seeking out answers; when we discussed this later, he initially forwarded a set of twelve images that he had made between 1991 and 1998. A list of titles, places, and dates arrived next, and during his follow-up commentary—engaged, factual, and prodigiously detailed—he carefully noted a series of key photographic encounters: with abandoned structures, storefronts, and painted signs; graffiti, posters, and stick-on lettering; and with ironic and conflicting messages, often involving the public display of private yearnings. As he reflected, he began to articulate how these images gradually became linked in his mind, and ultimately coalesced into what he came to realize was an entirely new style.

This was also a time of change for photography, as the anniversary celebrations of Daguerre's announcement drifted toward the unfamiliar shoreline of the digital image and the world wide web, where, unable to navigate, they eventually ran aground. The collision between two ways of picturemaking forced photography into an unknown future, changing every aspect of the practice—even to the sense of connection between subject and image, which Daguerre himself had taken pains to qualify as neither fixed nor absolute.

While the sesquicentennial was accompanied by exhibitions everywhere and was lastingly enriched by new books, this concentrated activity also fed into an ongoing wider search, for new definitions of what photography might now become. A.D. Coleman had outlined what he saw as a need to rethink the traditional narratives of photography in his 1979 essay *Making History*, and in a 1989 Kodak Lecture at Ryerson—which Bergerson had helped organize, and which he attended—Coleman publicly restated his challenge, this time with renewed urgency and a more global focus.

In the span of a decade, six new histories of photography appeared, each a response to the call for new accounts of a changing medium. The critical arena in which these histories were written was also changing, as photography began, Janus-like, to reexamine its roots and traditions while simultaneously reinventing itself as a new form of practice, one that would require new approaches and definitions.

For both photographers and audiences, the first Rephotographic Survey Project (1977–79) had begun a shift toward new thinking about representation of time and place, and photography's relationship to its own past; soon, other ways for photography to take itself as a subject started to appear. The 1987 exhibition *Photographs Beget Photographs* made it clear that self-reference and even self-reflexivity could be used to creative advantage in the making of new work, and another contemporaneous exhibition—*Radical/Rational/Space/Time: Idea Networks in Photography*—put forward the concept that photographs were not simply objects with fixed meanings, determined through representation of specific subject matter; in fact, photographic images now served to reflect ideas and patterns of thinking that were themselves constantly in flux. In his catalogue essay for this exhibition (1983), Paul Berger had stated it this way: "[T]he meaning of the photograph does not reside in its physical structure, but rather in the dynamic and negotiating interaction between ourselves, our culture, and the image in question."

Additionally, the broad-scale humanism of the *LIFE* photo essay and the reformist ideals of projects such as Cornell Capa's *The Concerned Photographer* were yielding significant ground to a more critical, and often more ironic, way of photographing. This change had been foreshadowed in John Szarkowski's *New Documents* (1967), Nathan Lyons' *Notations in Passing* (1974), and William Jenkins's *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* (1975), all shows that Bergerson had either noted with interest or seen in person. As the North American social fabric began to fray and then disintegrate in the 1980s, it seemed inevitable that the traditional

narratives of photographic reportage could no longer adequately reflect the starkness of these new realities. Sequences of individually composed photographs—thematically related and collectively self-aware, but not linked via time or place—would provide a much better means of description for this changed social landscape. Within each image would be other images, and additional layers of meaning could be built up by utilizing new strategies for sequencing, arranging, and presenting—which would, in turn, provide new ways to articulate the nature of photographic relationship.

Challenged by his discussions with Heath, energized by earlier meetings with Frederick Sommer, and excited at the prospect of sabbatical leave—and full of his usual enthusiasm despite a recession and the atmosphere of diminishing expectations all around him, Bergerson began to travel and to make new photographs. These would become the raw material for *Shards of America* and the two books that followed.

AMERICAN JOURNEYS

To understand America, one has to travel there. When Alexis de Tocqueville landed in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1831 after thirty-eight days at sea, the first thing he did was take a steamer to New York City; from there he went up the Hudson River to Albany, and later to Michigan and Wisconsin, circling back to Massachusetts after a brief passage through parts of Ontario and Quebec. Before returning to France, he visited Washington, D.C., and then Memphis, as well as other regions in the American South. While he and his traveling companion had originally set out "with the idea of writing an official report on the American penal system," the more significant result of their journey was the two-volume *Democracy in America*, which de Tocqueville finished writing the same year that Daguerre revealed his new process at the Académie des Sciences.

Later in 1839 (in August and September, and accompanied by his brother), Henry David Thoreau began a trip by "boat, foot, and stage"; an account of this journey became the first of his many books and essays about traveling in America. While best known for writing about one particular place, in fact Thoreau spent only two years and two months at Walden Pond, and it was while living in his cabin there that he finished the manuscript of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Published in 1849, this volume was followed by *Walking* (1861), and later by the posthumously released *Excursions* (1863), *The Maine Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865), and *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (1866). "A traveler is to be reverenced," wrote Thoreau, " . . . [h]is profession is the best symbol of our life. Going from __ toward __ ; it is the history of every one of us."

Mark Twain began his travels in 1852, at age seventeen, when he left Hannibal, Missouri. By 1869, when he published the first of his own travel books, photography was a well-established practice in North America, and Twain always seemed to have an almost photographic eye. He explained his attitude about travel in a passage from *The Innocents Abroad*: "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth. . . . "

Roy Morris, Jr., author of *American Vandal: Mark Twain Abroad* (2015), spoke of another aspect of Twain's fondness for travel, his

> . . . lifelong need to see and experience new things, a need that in itself was deeply and characteristically American. "I am wild with impatience to move—move—*Move!*" Twain wrote to his mother in 1867. "My mind gives me peace only in excitement and restless moving from place to place. I wish I never had to stop *anywhere*."

Bergerson's own "restless moving from place to place" is well-documented in his log books and notes, which list sixty-eight separate journeys in America since 1989. There are many intersections with the routes of his predecessors: with de Tocqueville's stopping places in New York, Washington, and Tennessee; with Thoreau's walking journeys in Maine, New Hampshire, and the towns of Massachusetts; and with Mark Twain's travels along the Mississippi and through its bordering states.

On all of his trips, Bergerson brought with him an intriguing blend of de Tocqueville's curiosity about American politics and culture, Thoreau's search to understand the true motivations of his fellow beings, and Twain's quick eye and deadpan wit. In this sense, Bergerson was not only carrying on the tradition that David Campany outlined in *The Open Road: Photography and*

the American Road Trip (2014), but was symbolically extending it back in time, to the early years of photography itself.

TEACHING

Any set of Bergerson itineraries shows a clear pattern, year after year: short trips in the spring, longer ones in the summer, week-long excursions in the fall. The destination columns are often basic (FLORIDA; N.Y. CITY; OHIO) or indicative of a general direction (NE USA TO BALTIMORE), but sometimes it seemed as if Bergerson was headed literally all over the American continent, everywhere at the same time. An entry for June 1999 reads DENVER, WYOMING, UTAH, NEVADA, ARIZONA, LAS VEGAS—IDAHO—DENVER for that trip alone. TOR—N. USA—YUKON—ALASKA would follow that same summer, and WESTERN CANADA, MUSEUMS and GALLERY TOUR is on the list for November, with the notation "(exhibition venue search) NO PHOTOGRAPHING DONE" in the line below. The place listings constantly change, but the travel seasons never vary. The rest of the year, Bergerson was teaching.

The curiosity and openness so essential to Bergerson's travel were complemented and counterbalanced by the exceptional focus he brought to the classroom. Throughout his career, students have commented on the artistic commitment and professional discipline that characterized his classes, and many have wondered aloud how Bergerson managed to maintain these for his entire time at Ryerson. While he mapped out his courses as carefully as his itineraries, the seemingly easy symbiosis between his work as a teacher and his photographic activities cannot just be explained by diligent planning. The connection runs deeper: embedded in all Bergerson's course documents are both his absolute engagement with photography and his conviction that this engagement could be deepened by sharing it with others.

His 1998 course outline for a one-term introductory class runs twenty-one pages. It sets out five separate projects over twelve weeks, in language that reveals much of his thinking about photographic representation. *The Drama of Light—The Formalist Arena* is followed by *Cultural Context—City;* the next project is even more briefly titled: *Gender.* Bergerson's instructions here read (with added italics): "Research a gender issue and make a picture which represents it. *Do not make an illustration . . . Use the issue as a starting point . . .* Consider carefully the vehicle you might use: social representation, political statement . . . , satire, irony, metaphor. . . . "

In the first half of a foundation course, in only six class periods, this sequence of visual problems moves students through how photographs are seen and constructed, how they are located and contextualized, and the vast array of human issues they address, particularly in terms of culture and identity. Following this, *The Betrayal of Images—Reality vs Representation* gets at the central question of what we see, as opposed to what we believe; and the final assignment, *Probing Surface/Probing Interior,* lists three options, *Picturing the Human Being*; *Systems/Structuralism*; and *Audience/Audience Participation.* Each assignment is meticulously presented: introduced via Bergerson's slide lectures and commentary, supported with references and readings, and thoroughly reviewed in critique.

These themes—light and form, place and culture, image and symbol, expression and identity—are expanded somewhat in his 2000 outline for his second-year class. The projects he presents here are *Fascination with Objects*; *A Sense of Place*; *The Human Condition*; and *Nature*: *Found and Altered.* In the second term, *Social Representation: Reinventing Documentary* provides a focus for the first of two more extended assignments and the final project is again determined by each student.

This same matrix of ideas and challenges is what drives Bergerson's personal photography. His framing and editing, perceptions and attitudes, questions and definitions grow equally from his photography and his experience of teaching. His working statement for *Shards of America* reads, in part*:*

> I am drawn to these messages . . . mixed messages . . . quirky elements in the social landscape.
>
> I photograph fragments, shards, clues, signs—signs that can nudge viewers into reflection about the . . . nature and condition of their culture, society . . . or even themselves. I photograph both literal and figurative signs that makers consciously and unconsciously leave behind.
>
> Literally, signs made . . . for a variety of reasons—personal, political, commercial—signs that are often ambiguous. Figuratively, signs that

> are not [actually] signs but are objects or places that we can read as signs, metaphors, symbols or clues about aspects of a culture.

The equivalence works in two ways. Bergerson's own fascination with objects, places, signs, the social landscape, and the human condition are as fully embedded in his photographs as they are in his assignment sheets. He and his students shared the same path, pursuing truth and illusion, comparing notes on the problem of reinventing documentary. No wonder they always responded so well: Bergerson's work, his travels, and his teaching were always part of a larger whole.

EXHIBITIONS AND BOOKS

Exhibition activities were another key to Bergerson's success as a teacher. Students could always see for themselves the connections he made between thinking and making—and amazingly, there was no discernible change in his rate of production between teaching and nonteaching years. Among the more than forty group exhibitions he lists after 1989, many have thematic titles, pointing to the varied ways curators have contextualized themes and preoccupations apparent in his work. Good examples are *The Photography Lesson* (1999), *Little Stabs of Happiness* (2004), *Digs in the Zone* (2005), and the 2008 traveling exhibition from the National Gallery, *Is there a there there?*. Bergerson's contemporaneous solo exhibitions generally did not use titles before the 1995 *Structures in a Social Landscape,* but from that year onward all but two were thematically driven. In addition to the exhibitions drawn from his books, after 1995 came *Notations from America*, *Messages from New York*, *Sublime Encounters* (which also exists as a book mock-up, prefiguring *American Artifacts*), and *Emblems and Remnants of the American Dream*, all of which provide succinct and incisive signals about the evolving thematic directions of his work.

Shards of America was published in 2004. By that time Bergerson had been traveling in the United States for fifteen years; the photographs he chose were made between 1991 and 2003. The earliest image was actually made in Cornwall, Ontario, just over the border from Hogansburg and Massena, New York; the next year he drove south on Interstate 81, making pictures in Watertown, New York, and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. By the time he finished in 2003 (again stopping in Pennsylvania and New York, as well as Massachusetts and Maryland), he had covered twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia in a series of trips that could be strung together as an arc from Washington State to Maine, via California, the southern half of the U.S., and up through the eastern states. He made multiple visits to New York City, both before and after 9/11.

The hundred and nineteen photographs are organized as diptychs and prefaced by a single image, whose dark tonalites are partially offset by a message of "Welcome" in blue neon cursive, and a block-letter declaration of "LIFE" on the wall above. In contrast to the brown and black that surround these words of greeting, the book concludes with a blaze of magenta, red, ivory, white, crimson, and blue, in a pair of 2001 images from New York made in June and October (see Fig. 65 for the second of these). Each impeccably framed photograph is sized at seven inches square and placed in an unerring sequence, which seems to have been determined in a single instant—as if a vial of carefully distilled thought had been quickly decanted into a beaker of blistering intuitive energy.

Most photographs include words and signs, reflecting Bergerson's preoccupation with "messages, fragments, symbols, and metaphors" as key indicators of cultural meaning. All were made with short to medium focal-length lenses, the camera positioned naturally between waist and eye level. Everything is close at hand: the viewer can imagine stepping forward into a photograph, or pressing up against the weathered glass of a display window for a better look. While the emotional valence of the images can range from deadpan to brutal, and many expressive nuances are highly encoded, the actual objects, physical spaces, and surfaces are immediately in front of you, reachable, tactile, and present—and presented with the compressed efficiency of the frontal view.

Advances in printing and access to newer tools enabled Bergerson to later rework certain photographs for exhibition, often at a much greater degree of enlargement. By 2009, when selected images from *Sublime Encounters* were exhibited at the Stephen Bulger Gallery, he was already experimenting with radically larger image sizes, and two new aspects of his work were coming to the fore: a different sense of narrative and a very different construction of space. These changes would become even more apparent in *American Artifacts* (2014), which extended his journeys by another decade.

The new book includes new states: Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska; Alabama and Missouri, Minnesota, and Wisconsin; Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon; and New Jersey. By the end of 2013 Bergerson had traversed nearly the entire country. While the messages embedded in these new photographs are fully congruent with those in his earlier work, there are also significant differences in approach and production. The images are larger, at eight inches square; spacing and perspective are subtly different, and the sequencing, rather than resembling a taut spring holding together a single, complex narrative, is built up through a series of shorter visual essays. Each of these begins with a single photograph, followed by sets of paired images. While the use of diptychs is still a key element, the sequences now read as short poems, almost as haiku. Stopping to count, one finds three sets of nineteen images, three of seventeen, and a final sequence of fifteen.

The shorter, somehow more lyrical groupings in *American Artifacts* presented viewers with new ways to understand Bergerson's preoccupations with the social landscape. Whereas *Shards of America* seemed always to refer back to the American political situation and explicitly referenced both the first Gulf War and the September 11 attacks, by 2014 Bergerson was speaking about "LOSS, HOPE, FEAR and DESIRE" and "larger, more general themes intertwine[d] . . . in the various sequences." Quoting David Harris in his talks about this book, he described these more specifically as "traditional family values, relationships between men and women, religious and community standards, patriotism, consumerism, . . . a simmering violence; and a nostalgia for a simpler past."

For the most part, these images continue the use of focal length and framing that animated the earlier book. But while one usually has a sense that the subject is right at hand, there is also something new here. On occasion, Bergerson steps back from the scene so that the expected continuity between foreground and background is interrupted—by a reflection, a gap in the surface, or by another image. This technique pushes the viewer's perception simultaneously in two directions: back toward the camera, into a redefined foreground, or deeper into the image, where a new set of spatial relations is created via a plane of completely incongruent space. It's a startling effect—see Figs. 48, 54, or 82—and as close to three-dimensional illusion as photography can get; but it pulls us not toward a simpler past, but into a more complex present.

SIGNS FROM THE HEARTLAND

Signs and graffiti appear with less frequency in *American Artifacts* and their messages often have a more questioning, even philosophical, tenor: "Why was I born," or "Everybody's Got Issues / Do You?" Sometimes there is just a street address or a telephone number, and sometimes only a single word, "REASON," or "Thing's." While Bergerson was always attuned to the particular mix of the graphic, the expletive, and the unspoken that characterizes American vernacular expression, in his second book he adjusted the variables, seeing at times an indication of acceptance, or a halting invitation to dialogue.

The writings he selected for *American Artifacts,* from essays by Margaret Atwood and Nathan Lyons, provide additional context for this shift in tone. In passages from *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*—an "intellectual history of debt" compiled from her well-known 2008 Massey Lectures, which Bergerson used to preface his images—Margaret Atwood acknowledged the crushing burden so many are forced to carry, even as, in the words of one reviewer, she "explore[s] debt as an ancient and central motif in religion, literature, and the structure of human societies."

Sequencing: Display as Discourse was one of Nathan Lyons's last commentaries on photography, and Bergerson positioned it as the concluding text for *American Artifacts*. In this essay, Lyons examined the practice of ordering and arranging photographs, while noting that the act of display is itself a form of communication, an essential element of all human culture. Further, Lyons argued, "While photography has been used extensively, its relevance as a sign system is just beginning to be investigated. . . . It is not simply a question of photography or film or video or visual books or electronic imaging systems, but our development of visual sign systems that is crucial."

Bergerson knew Lyons well and was deeply influenced by him. The combination of razor-sharp visual logic and unerring, intuitive grasp of metaphorical possibility—which animates the diptychs and sequences in all of Bergerson's work—is something he absorbed from Lyons, adapting and integrating it into his own practice over the course of many years. At the same time, neither *Shards of America* nor *American Artifacts* bears any trace of imitation: what Bergerson learned from *Notations in Passing*, he made uniquely his own. In

post-9/11 New York, both Bergerson and Lyons happened upon the same storefront display (Bergerson's photograph is Fig. 65), but no one would ever be the least confused as to which photographer had made which image.

Bergerson readily acknowledges other influences: Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and Dave Heath, whose work first stimulated Bergerson's own preoccupation with the possibilities of sequencing; John Brumfield, Paul Berger, and Rudolf Arnheim, whose lectures and writings on the nature of visual thinking Bergerson found both resonant and provocative; and Minor White, John Szarkowski, and again Dave Heath, who made clear to Bergerson the need for a critical framework—something they all saw as an essential point of departure for making, editing, or responding to photographs.

Two years after *American Artifacts* was completed, Bergerson began using a rectangular-format digital camera, sometimes approaching his subjects from a greater distance. The sequences that he initially formed from this newer work emphasize time and place as much as specific detail, and pay particular attention to textures, surfaces, and the subdued colours—orange, ochre, yellow, brown, and green, offset by varying blues—which are painted on or smudged over weather-worn buildings, eventually seeping into both wood and brickwork. There is an elegiac, almost valedictory aspect to these images, presenting the now-silent remains of an era, vaguely remembered but still idealized, even when overlaid with evidence of debt, abandonment, or the wearing away of dreams.

During the initial planning for this book, the gradual thematic shift in Bergerson's work—which had begun to appear as early as 2011–12—seemed to be confirmed and extended, both through the selection and the sequencing of these new pictures. Months later, however, an excited email from Bergerson announced: "It seems I cannot stop sequencing . . . the last update has a number of changes. . . . I think it's much stronger now!" Bergerson had completely rethought his original progression, juxtaposing elements in far more radical ways, and incorporating new images with new expressive parameters into the book's final section, to create a far different emotional hierarchy.

The perfect equilibrium of Bergerson's earlier diptychs, maintained by invisible, almost magnetic lines of force—see, for example, Figs. 63–64 or 87–88—gives way in these new pairings to an unsettling disequilibrium. Two photographs, from San Angelo, Texas, and Miami, Florida (Figs. 104–105) yank the viewer into a world of ambiguity and ambivalence, forming an image pair utterly unlike anything Bergerson had previously attempted. Six pages later, we encounter another baffling combination: a painted figure from Paterson, New Jersey, eyes closed and lost in thought, opposite an image from New York City, with an insistent message—"STOP SELFIES"—spray-stenciled onto a vandalized brickwork column. The closed eyes are interesting, and Bergerson finds them again—twice—in another image, also of painted figures (Fig. 147). This is a deeply ambiguous photograph; visually resolved, yet charged with a silent tension. The way the Lolita-like figure is painted brings to mind a sentence by John Szarkowski (from his comments on Cartier-Bresson's image, *Cordoba, Spain, 1933,* in *Looking at Photographs*), "The photograph . . . concerns gesture, line, shape, scale, the flatness of the picture plane, and the difference between art and life." Szarkowski continues, however: "To say that the picture concerns these things does not, of course, mean that it explains them."

Among the images from *Shards of America* and *American Artifacts* that Bergerson included in this volume, only two show specific individuals—Benjamin Franklin and the blues singer John Lee Hooker—who gaze directly back at the viewer, their starkly differing coordinates in time, place, and circumstance symbolizing irrevocable change over the course of two centuries of American life. By contrast, in the sequences from Bergerson's new work, the viewer is stared at, or stared down, multiple times: by a bikini-clad figure on a wall mural in Miami; by a cowboy on a painted wooden sign in Albuquerque; by an unsmiling woman carefully cut out and glued to a sheet of plywood, which covers a doorway in Baltimore; and by a half-hidden figure in an image from New York (Fig. 126), whose eyes blaze with an unspoken challenge, looking out from above and just behind the vague, bored gaze of the model in a poster below. A few fragments of text imply some message, but it is the two pairs of eyes that provide the focal point.

Seeing—looking, looking in, looking at, looking out—is not always simple. The green-eyed individual in Fig. 132 is either badly painted or afflicted with strabismus; the bas-relief rifleman in Fig. 116 takes sightless aim, his implied target painted over; and in the next-to-last image pair, a storefront grate interrupts the gazes of two figures in a circus-poster image, a leopard and a

woman with a rose in her hair. Their stares are determined, but both are cut off. Only with the grate closed (and the abandoned shop reopened) could we see what they are actually looking at.

These are complex, layered photographs, which present places, objects, signs, fragments, and markings in a new way, animated by Bergerson's ever-evolving approach to pairing and sequencing. Irony and juxtaposition are always present, and the question of seeing—and of how things are seen, by the photographer as well as the viewer—animates the entire section. But the sense of location and temporality, the warmth of colour, and Bergerson's uncanny attunement to the textures and traces of human activity all suggest something else: his underlying empathy for the individual human beings who are his real subjects, and whose existence is always implicit in his photographs. In our earlier conversations he put it this way: "I am trying to say something about the struggles of people in the U.S. during this time, and also about the common humanity of those who are struggling. . . . These are troubled people, trying to present themselves . . . [even as] their value systems are always in conflict. . . . "

In the book's concluding diptych, two almost-monochrome images revisit the idea that photographs arrest and preserve time, reprising a theme that drove Bergerson to explore black-and-white photography during his formative years. Made ten years apart on trips to Texas and Indiana, they recall the tonalities of Bergerson's 1968 street images from New York and Toronto (Figs. 4–7), but they contradict any notion of freezing a moment by presenting, in direct frontal perspective, the immutable fact that no photograph, and even no image, is beyond the reach of time. The faces in a family photograph, hopefully taped to the back surface of a store window, are bleached to the point of vanishing, while family names are still legible in the carefully affixed caption below. In the ruined bas-relief opposite, the engraved text is at best hard to decipher, yet the sculpted figures at either side retain their sense of life and movement. In one of these photographs, despite Daguerre's claims that photographs "are rendered unalterable to further effect of light," text outlasts image; in the other, image outlasts text, even in stone. The fundamental questions of how and what we see and the essential relationships between image and experience, art and life, time and history are clearly presented—but again, to say they are presented does not mean they are explained.

On a 2013 trip that included a visit to Yardleyville, Pennsylvania, Bergerson spotted a wall mural that seemed to perfectly encapsulate the perennial tension in American life between nostalgia for a disappearing pastoral existence and new faith in machine technology. The photograph he made there, reproduced as Fig. 137, shows a nineteenth-century river scene framed by three arches of a sturdy stone bridge, which is proudly presented as evidence of industrial accomplishment. The metaphor of progress is furthered by the foreground image of a barge heading downriver: its wake indicates an engine, and the barge is about to pass a man standing with his draft horse on the riverbank towpath. Man and horse pose themselves directly facing the viewer, aware they will soon be replaced; they are flanked by two painted ducks, heading toward painted cattails. If the ducks were to keep walking, they would exit the painting and find themselves on the actual river bank; from there, if they continued, they could waddle over to the empty porch in the opposite photograph, where the "Beware of Dog" sign has been pulled up, no longer needed. The mural's true purpose is to camouflage construction-site hoarding, behind which is a real bridge, now in twenty-first century need of repair. Bridge and scaffold, image and illusion, painting and photograph are all suspended within a single frame; they form a nearly perfect, yet asymmetric and also unnerving, vision of an imagined America.

De Tocqueville, Thoreau, and Twain would all have recognized the principal narratives of this image, albeit in differing ways. De Tocqueville might have believed it a depiction of American labor, "the necessary, natural, and honest condition of human existence"; Thoreau might well rail against the motorized river craft and its symbolization of commerce, a prime contributor to the "lives of quiet desperation" he felt was the lot of most; Mark Twain would instantly spot the fakery, seeing it as a perfect metaphor for the combination of gullibility and pragmatism that marked so much of the American character. Garry Winogrand, a more contemporary fellow-traveller, would have seen all this too, although he would have responded more to the photograph's irony, and its signification of American decline. But Winogrand always held to the idea that "the fact of photographing something changes [it]," and I think he would have acknowledged that all of Bergerson's work has utilized this principle, forming a coherent expressive whole by changing the raw material in front of the camera, shaping and molding it into these photographs.

—Don Snyder