

Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Floor:

A Conversation with Eden Robbins



“I have a new job,” Eden Robbins tells me as he unpacks his portfolio cases. “I work the same hours as a drug dealer... I’m at high-rise construction sites in the middle of the night, verifying the level and consistency of newly poured concrete. I’m up above the city at two, three in the morning... sometimes 30, 31 stories. There’s nobody there... I have to walk up with all my equipment. But once I’m done, I can take photographs.”

He adds: “I did these with my phone.”

Robbins elaborates: “There are more construction cranes in Toronto right now than in any city in North America... Seattle comes in a distant second, but with less than a fifth as many cranes in use... it’s completely crazy. There is a lot of work, but the teams who spread and level the concrete are incredibly good, real craftsmen... While I have to measure and certify everything, the results are always within the tolerances required. And I am seeing these surfaces in a whole new way... so this is what I’m doing right now.”

The prints he is laying out don’t look like pictures of concrete. The surfaces they depict don’t look like floors, and the images themselves don’t look like a cellphone could possibly have made them. Output on Hahnemuhle paper, with deep, carbon blacks and xenon-arc whites, these pictures seem resolved yet almost unstable, shooting out patterns of light and dark, vibrating with visual energy. Their tonalities are those we associate with the night sky, or with the vastness of space, so I ask how these images are made; I know Robbins doesn’t secretly work for NASA. By way of answering, he shows me some originals on his phone screen, and explains that he uses an image-processing program from Topaz Labs. Later, he emailed with a bit more detail:

I use Photo AI, and very simply at that. I do a bit of sharpening and “enhancing” (which just rez’s the image up 2X). It seems to be able to drive itself and does not require you to sit there with sliders, adjusting, looking, processing, viewing, trying again. It usually works right out of the box, first attempt... It does require a decent amount of RAM on your computer, [and] plenty of time to make yourself a cup of tea while it’s processing and saving. But then, it’s just sort of like washing film, in the old days.

He brings out more portfolios: triptychs from Prague, panoramas made with the Hasselblad XPan, dioramas from the Museum of Natural History, pictures from Havana, Moscow, Rome, St. Petersburg, all over Europe; portraits, beach scenes, architecture, documentary projects. One series, images of witnesses to the JFK assassination, stops me right in my tracks. I start to wonder if this interview should be titled “The Compleat Photographer,” and we set up another meeting so I can learn more.

Our second conversation, a more general one, is edited and excerpted below:

It's been an interesting journey... I received a BSc in physics from the University of Alberta, where I specialized in astronomy; it was really by happenstance that I came to photography.

When my grandmother's "estate" was settled, there was some costume jewelry that brought in a little bit of money; I think my share was 25 British pounds. Anyway, I went out and bought a camera. It was a Zorki 4, the Russian Leica ripoff (which I still have), and I started to take pictures in high school.

By luck as much as anything, things started to work out. My first sale was a photograph of school kids with the Stanley Cup: one student had actually brought it in for Show and Tell at the school where my mother worked. They circled around it, reaching up like it was the Holy Grail. I sold the picture to the Edmonton Journal, and after that when I would go photographing, if anyone challenged me, I would say I worked for the Journal.

I was interested in music, theatre and the performing arts. I was once photographing a Stephane Grappelli performance, and backstage after the show, he asked if I had a car, as for some reason he needed a ride back to his hotel. So of course I drove him... I had a sense of opportunity, adventure, doors opening—the camera enabled me to go places, and to have an excuse to be there.

After university, I decided I wanted to be a photographer, and my family encouraged me, so in 1985 I applied to the School of Image Arts, then known as the Film and Photography Department, at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Toronto Metropolitan University). Dave Heath, Rob Gooblar, Bill Scanlon and Jurgen Lutz were among the faculty who taught me.

I had been at Image Arts for two years when the photographer Shin Sugino offered me a full-time job. I already had one degree and was seven to ten years older than my fellow students, so I said yes, and stayed with Shin for another two years. I learned a lot being around his talent and observing his work ethic and commitment, but I came to recognize that I could also do what he was doing, at least in terms of setting up a shoot.... Eventually he "fired" me, which turned out to be a good thing. He gave me a Speedotron pack and a flash head and said to "go out and do it yourself." We're still friends, and I'm regularly impressed by his new work.

I met John Mastro Monaco while at Sugino's studio, and he gave me a list of ten people to call; his name meant the response changed from "we're busy at the moment, but you could try calling sometime next month" to "what are you doing this afternoon?". This was a turning point, and for the next 30 years I did editorial work, advertising, annual reports, and magazine assignments for the likes of *Saturday Night*, *Toronto Life*, *Canadian Business*, the *Globe's Report on Business*, and other, biweekly magazines. At first it was day work and editorial shoots. Later came advertising and more extended projects, and I took every opportunity to do my own work and to take extra time while on location.

There is a transition that involves going from making money to really understanding the medium.... I had gotten a sense of this earlier, in a history of photography class, which was one reason I was always doing work for myself in parallel with paid assignments. While working with Sugino, following a successful assignment I was offered a choice between a

\$2500 bonus or the chance to travel to Portugal and France for three weeks and shoot for myself every day, and of course I opted for that... Later, I got another opportunity to travel, this time across Canada, thanks to an Ontario Arts Council grant in the early 90s.

Editorial photography has its rewards, and so do jobs that are more of just a technical challenge. Once I did an assignment for *Saturday Night* about a writer who was losing his sight from macular degeneration. As soon as he told me that he would use the noise/vibration of his tires hitting the “cat’s eye” lane markers in the road to monitor his position— AND that he called it ‘driving Braille’ —I knew we would be able to make some creative photographs. The photographs were chosen for the *American Photography* annual that year.

Just last week, I had an assignment shooting an architectural model. The landscaping was an important part of the project, and all the miniature trees had to be perfectly in focus, so I used focus stacking in Photoshop... Maybe it’s because of my science background, but I do enjoy the technical side of the medium as well: it’s a kind of right-brain / left-brain thing. Right now, I’m back to using a 4x5 Toyo field camera, and re-learning how to compose with an image that is upside down and backwards.

Someone once said that I take lyrical photographs, and I feel that I’m able to do that—I enjoy it. I like taking pictures.

So for all these projects, that’s really how I get there; I don’t have a specific frame of reference. For what I’m going through now, I needed some kind of outlet, and the new work provides that.... To be up there, sort of up in the heavens, in the middle of the night—it’s somewhere I’ve never been or seen, so I take pictures.

I have a hard time sitting down and watching TV. I would rather be making something—maybe this is an inherited trait. But somehow, I saw this stuff—these images are instantaneous encounters—I’m seeing the lyrical, seeing the cinematic. It’s as much an opportunity as going to the moon.

On days off, I ride around on a bicycle, with the 4x5 in the back; at night, I’m up above the city. A lot of it is simply discovery—that’s what keeps the excitement alive.

As we wrap up, I keep looking at the prints on the table. I now know what they are: markings and striations on new concrete—and how Robbins made them, with a phone camera and AI software—but what they suggest, what they express, how they take hold of the viewer, that is something for which I’m still reaching for words. Robbins shows me a text from one of his co-workers—*Your Instagram pics are insane by the way. Way to turn random finished floor shit into art*—and that feels like a good place to start; but I’ve continued to wonder about the sheer abstract force of these images.

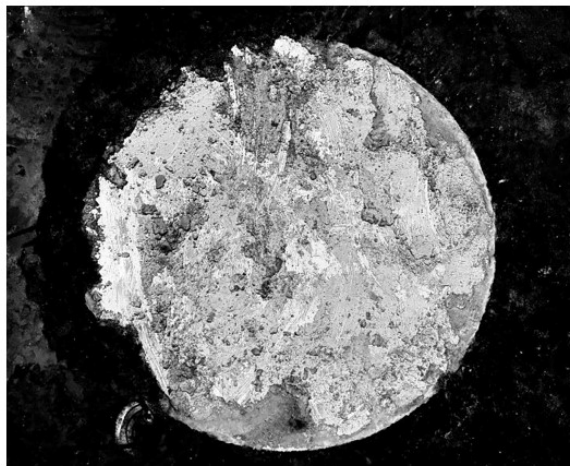
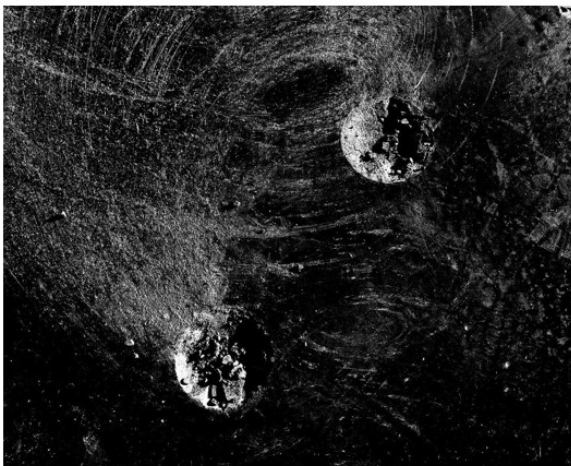
Via the search terms *abstraction*, *modernism*, and *the poetic image*, I end up a visitor to The Poetry Foundation: (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism>). Their site was good, and a bit of further digging led me to Wallace Stevens’s *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, whose title I promptly stole. The poem is a striking example of how plain language can suggest an entire universe. But a poetic image is not a photographic one, and I wanted something from a photographer.

It was a text by Aaron Siskind that best explained the sense of energy and aliveness that Robbins's photographs display. In the end, these excerpts from Siskind's personal essay, *The Drama of Objects*, spoke most directly about Robbins's new work:

Pressed for the meaning of these pictures, I should answer, obliquely, that they are informed with animism.... Aesthetically, they pretend to the resolution of these sometimes fierce, sometimes gentle, but always conflicting forces.

Photographically speaking, there is no compromise with reality. The objects are rendered sharp, fully textured, and undistorted.... But the potent fact is not any particular object, but rather that the meaning of these objects exists only in their relationships with other objects, or in their isolation....

These photographs appear to be a representation of a deep need for order. Time and again "live" forms play their...part against a backdrop of strict rectangular space—a flat, unyielding space.... The four edges of the rectangle are absolute bounds. There is only the drama of the objects, and you, watching.



Eden Robbins's portfolios can be viewed at www.edenrobbins.com

Images from his current project are posted on Instagram at
<https://www.instagram.com/edenrobbins/>

The full text of Aaron Siskind's essay can be found via this link:
<https://ia803001.us.archive.org/1/items/aaronsiskindtowa00sisk/aaronsiskindtowa00sisk.pdf>