Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND Emily Stamey

With contributions by
Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,
Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,
AND Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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After several days of trying to photograph a "glorious" new pepper, Edward Weston exclaimed, "I’m not satisfied yet!" Then he placed it in a tin funnel – "a bright idea, a perfect relief for the pepper and adding reflected light to important contours." After printing the image, he proclaimed it "a peak of achievement":

It is classic, completely satisfying, – a pepper … but more than a pepper: abstract, in that it is completely outside subject matter. It has no psychological attributes; no human emotions are aroused: this new pepper takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind … into an inner reality, – the absolute, – with a clear understanding, a mystic revelation … seeing "through one’s eyes, not with them": the visionary.

Although the photograph’s value as proof of these exalted philosophical claims might be uncertain, there is no question about its value as a demonstration of Weston’s photographic ability. Pepper is a classic photograph, one of the most famous images by one of the most famous of all photographers.

Weston began as a pictorialist, making dreamy, soft-focus images printed on matte paper. He then adopted a more modern style, turning to sharp focus and glossy prints that would produce what he believed the camera did best: a "stark beauty" based on the exact rendering of rhythm, form, and detail. Often that meant creating a close-up view, for clarity and concentration. Weston insisted that he wanted to reveal "the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself." If the idea of rendering tone and contour seems like a throwback to the language of drawing, it was nonetheless fundamental to his approach. In this case, the sheen of the pepper’s surface and the brilliant highlights are set off by the equally intense dark areas, making the form compelling and mysterious. The funnel – and Weston’s skill – made that possible. But he always argued that "art is a way of seeing, not a matter of technique."

This is a pepper with character, and despite Weston’s assertion that the image is abstract, presenting a subject with no inherent significance, it has elicited all kinds of responses. For example, the critic Susan Sontag, alluding to this and other Weston photographs, thought his "notions of beauty" had, with time, become "banal," an outmoded high-modernist cliché.

For all his talk of "mystic revelation" and his adherence to a purist approach to art, Weston also had a playful side, as is evident in what he wrote about the pepper’s fate: "It has been suggested that I am a cannibal to eat my models after a masterpiece. But I rather like the idea that they become a part of me, enrich my blood as well as my vision."

Robert Silberman

2. Daybooks, II: 147.
3. Daybooks, I: 55. Weston’s emphasis.
4. Daybooks, II: 156.
About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vikki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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