

Pulling Out the Stops on Photography



In the beginning there was a lenslike oculus in the hitherto unfathomable darkness. This is what a rogue saltimbanquesque wit might be inclined to call the camera obscura phase of photographic creation. But lest we be confined

within the iron bars of this cage, what say we step outside the box & explore for a moment that a camera is more than casually cognate with a chamber, which necessarily puts us within a mere hop, skip, &/or quantum leap of the shadows projected onto the walls of Plato's cave, if you'll allow an analogy that has everything to do with the etiology of photography. In other words, whereas many of us believe the uniVerse we inhabit to be composed of neutrinos, photons, quarks & sundry other subatomic wavicles, electromagnetic pulsations, dark matter, galaxies, stars, planets, etc., to echo the likes of Muriel Rukeyser & Terence McKenna, it's actually woven of language & stories.

Among the photographers The Holter Museum of Art has exhibited over the years are such consummate shadow-catchers as Ansel Adams, Zach Begler, Joanne Berghold, Jill Brody, Richard Buswell, Nicole Keintz, Kurt Keller, Kevin League, Michael Lee, Joel Maes, Ryan Parker, Wilbur Rehmann, John Smart, & Jeff Van Tine.

At this juncture of our foray into the not-readily-quantifiable mysteries of photography, it is critical that we not shy away from sounding a cautionary, even borderline risque, note concerning the nature of the medium that is the focus of our inquiry. By way of a segue or sorts into the dark/light heArt of the matter, one could do far worse than bear in mind Susan Sontag's insistence in her core-curricular "On Photography" that "Like guns & cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive . . . When we are afraid, we shoot. When we are nostalgic, we take pictures" (consider in this context T. S. Eliot's 'evening with the photograph album') . . . Images transfix. Images anesthetize . . . All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." For Sontag, "by slicing out this moment & freezing it," all photographs testify to time's quasi-superluminal evanescence.

Katie Roiphe in her "The Violet Hour" (2016) cuts even deeper into this curiouser & curiouser conundrum :: "Photography converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also -- wittingly or unwittingly -- the recording angels of death." This seemingly extreme point of view is echoed by Debbie Harry{the 'eyeconic' lead singer for Blondie}'s query in her aptly titled "Face It" (2019) :: "Does a photograph steal your soul? Were the Aboriginal people right? Are photographs pArt of some mystical image bank, a type of visual Akashic record?" In an analogous fashion, Roland Barthes in his "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography" (1980) warns us about the 'subtlest deceptions' of photography, going on to speak of "A photograph as a trace of lumiNous rays emanating from something that {purportedly} exists, something that is (or was) tHere . . . With language it is possible to talk of something that is not tHere. With photography we are looking at something that has been & is no longer tHere . . ."