

History of Photography

John Szarkowski Exhibit

Modern Museum of Art
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The John Szarkowski exhibit beautifully and meticulously captured all the elements of photography that we have been studying this semester. He has taken all aspects of life, the very life we live and see on a daily basis, and made them into something special and unique. Things that have become commonplace to us are not taken for granted while viewing his exhibit. A brick, a piece of glass, a curtain, a blade of grass, a design on a building whose image has been captured on film up close so as to obscure the remaining portions is all important now.

There are many things that may be said about his work. There is a sense of peace and normalcy in his view of the world. His work is graceful, yet compelling. One of the things that impressed me the most about this exhibit was the expression of life in so many different ways. He made use of a wide variety of subjects and locations in his study. From a simple, mundane glass of water to landscaping in different settings, he managed to capture their essence and make them stand out. The extent to which an exhibit impresses me correlates to the variety of emotions I feel as I'm viewing it. In fact, if I can be taken out of my own world, even for just a brief moment, and force memories to the forefront in vivid detail, the artist will hold my attention.

Of the photographs I have viewed, I have taken an assortment of those which affected me the most. These would be the pieces that made me take notice immediately and took me "out of the box" and made me think.

A 3' x 4' photograph of a small, cool tinted, crystal-clear glass of water almost full placed on a non-definable surface with a minimal background and taken at close range was the first item that grabbed my attention. It struck me as a little offbeat, utterly

simple, and utterly tranquil. A number of its qualities made me return to it to take a digital photograph of my own. The only consequence to this was the photograph of the glass was protected by a highly reflective glass cover (ironically speaking). In contrast, imagine going from the simplicity of a small glass of untouched water to a wide angle view of the ocean in tumult is as Stuart Klipper's "Swell."

A magnificent piece presented as a triptych titled "#1229 Tabular Bergs from Astolabe Glacier" from his series "On Antarctica," 1989, "Swell" is an undeniable presence in the exhibit. It offers a panoramic view of a turbulent ocean, foreboding clouds, and a huge sense of unrest. All the viewer has been allowed to see is ocean and sky. There is a sharp contrast at the horizon and a full range of tonal grays. The deep grays in the center of the clouds and the choppiness of the waves imply an approaching storm. They seem to hover in the center where the waves seem the most chaotic. In doing so, they obliterate the horizon. Yet, what sun does shine through the deepest clouds foretells of hope that there is an ending to this storm, and peace is inevitable. All is right with the world. The implication of danger to human life is apparent without any sign of human life.

These two photographs bring to mind the contrast of the smallness and the greatness of life as man vs. nature, reminiscent of Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea." It may be implied that man is in control in the glass of water. He is safe. However, in the ocean, nature possesses the power and the ability to control humanity at will. On the other hand, there is the view of life on land.

The depictions of rural life overall gave me a sense of peace, simplicity, order, depth, and the natural. “Barn,” simply named is not simple to the end of composition. The perspective at which it was shot and the lighting coming in from the left made this an interesting piece. Its simple geometric form, openness, and lack of decoration give it depth and order. It is bare, free of human or animal clutter, and gives the viewer a sense of being detached from the world. In “Triptych Around the Meadow,” 1996-1998, the formal elements are carefully considered. The house may be seen from a side perspective with a tree covering the front and reaching out to the sky. The darkness of the doorway gives it a barren and desolate, almost abandoned look. This gives the impression of a poor, working class habitat, while the other two pieces appear to be there for aesthetics. And pleasing to the eye they are. The trees form a natural arch over the road. This affords the viewer (or the driver) both protection from the elements and sheer beauty. Likewise, the arch forms a gradation of shades from the road up.

The leaves and flowers are crisp and may be seen in detail. The depth of field is working to provide an indefinite road to anywhere your mind will take you. There is a promise of sunshine after the cool shade that Szarkowski placed in the center of the photo. Finally in the rural aspect of life, Eadweard J. Muybridge managed to capture the opposite effect of small-town rural landscape.

“Valley of the Yosemite from Mosquito Camp” of 1939 really brings out the ultimate best of nature. It is beautifully composed and stands around 3'x 4.' There is a cool stillness to the environment and the mountains reflected in the lake are so clear you can almost see a human face | the outline of the mountain through the water. The

sun shines through the trees with an influence of surrealism. An early morning mist is captured in the background before the mountains, which adds to the serenity and beauty of the landscape. The detail in both the bark and the leaves in the trees allow the bend to reach toward the center as if to meet the mist. This photograph captures the beauty of natural life in monumental scale in its most natural form. Granted, Szarkowski does not let us dismiss the real world.

To focus on a more people friendly setting without the stress of big city bustle, Szarkowski included rural shots of the country. Some are on a more intimate level, while others cover more ground, i.e. “General Garrard Home, Lake Pepin” 1957, and “Farm Near Caledonia” 1957, “Grand Portage, MN,” 1957, and “Minor River,” respectively. They all provide depth of field within a setting of solid Americana. They are all homey, welcoming photographs. General Garrard’s abode has an open gate quite visible in the foreground; it is the proverbial “white picket fence” that shouts the American Dream. Just inside lush foliage in detail is waiting to greet you. There is contrast in the leaves and the home, and in the grounds. This domain gives a sense of wealth, security, and comfort. Granted, in the more open landscapes, i.e. “Farm Near Caledonia,” “Grand Portage,” and “Minor River,” there is a sense of order, basic necessities, and home. The land is sculpted and natural.

“Farm” offers rolling hills, abundant trees, and a winding road to civilization in the form of a single home. “Grand Portage” and “Minor River” have similar elements, but offer lakes as the primary focus and mountains and sky as backdrops. Water

symbolizes life, comfort, nature, and sustenance. And on the opposite end of the life spectrum is city life.

The use of verticals, interesting composition, shadows, highlights, are prevalent in the “Wainwright Building, St. Louis” 1954-55. Szarkowski has captured signs of life all over; in the windows ajar enough to let the curtains blow and the lights be seen, and in the street with vehicles in motion. He captured foreboding clouds in the distance which contributed to the deep shades in the buildings which flow onto the street signaling the passage of time. And time does have a way of escaping quickly when you’re enjoying yourself. For the final pieces I was able to study, I chose the “Prudential Building (Guaranty) Capital” 1951-2, and “Carson Price Scott, Chicago” 1954.

The Prudential building is ornate in decoration and the sun has created interesting shades. More structurally different is Carson Price Scott. This piece struck with me personally in its roundness and mood. It has a 1950’s look, which is a time frame Szarkowski is best known for. The people are dressed in attire that reminds me of being a youngster myself. Indeed, the two people in the foreground, in essence, could be my mother and me—a time when all was right with the world.