

A State of Speechless Wonder and Awe

Reflections on Robert Adams' *Beauty in Photography*

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Robert Adams, *Beauty in Photography: Essays in Defense of Traditional Values*. Aperture Foundation, 112pp., \$17 paper.

IN THE 1970S, ROBERT ADAMS WROTE VARIOUS ESSAYS THAT were collected under the title *Beauty In Photography*. These writings look at the subject from various perspectives, and address a set of themes that includes “Truth and Landscape,” “Beauty in Photography,” and “Making Art New,” among others.

For Adams—a practicing photographer—photography is art, because photographs, just like painting and sculpture, function in the domains of structure and form, composition, gradations of color and hue (he photographs only in black and white), and present the photographer’s view, his emotional response to, and thoughts about, the subject matter. Is this not what all visual art does? All media present the artist’s ideas about something of meaning to the artist.

Adams notes that “the pictures we treasure, the ones that sustain us, are independent of fashion.” Those pictures may not be coveted by large numbers, but they are the best, and have the most meaning. They must do what all great art does, and that is to stand the test of time. Fashion, by definition, is of the moment, transitory, and popular. Like commercial music, it is written for commercial reasons, and is usually entertainment, not art. Although occasionally, even these works can transcend their time and purpose, as do some of the fashion photographs of Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, as in the musical realm, where Mozart’s serenades, many of which were written as background music for social events, are nonetheless among the finest music ever composed.

Adams proposes that landscape photography, which belongs to a genre that is also found in the realm of painting, offers three truths: geography, autobiography, and metaphor. It offers “an affection for life...a record of place.” These pictures respond to the human love of, and response to, nature. They provide a record not just of place, but also of feeling, of the artist’s experience of the place. A landscape may be seen as a metaphor: for grandeur, for loneliness, for solitude. Its “main business...is a rediscovery and reevaluation of where we find ourselves.” A landscape photograph is like a visual diary, a recording or representation of the feeling the place engendered. At the same time, it might be beyond our limited selves, and correspond to a universal understanding of something in, or out of, this world.

In talking about beauty, Adams quotes the poets William Bronk and William Carlos Williams, who said, respectively, “Ideas are always wrong,” and “No ideas but in things.” This is demonstrative of the artist’s distrust of ideas and speech, and the resultant greater emphasis on feelings and objects, and the either intentional or unconscious thoughts with which they are imbued. For Adams, ideas are not to be trusted, for an idea can’t validate a feeling or a thing. Feelings, not things, are of course the *métier* of the Romantics, for whom they are meant to be unleashed in the artistic process. However, are they not part of the inherent nature of *any* artistic object, Romantic or not? Don’t *all* artistic objects also contain an idea or ideas, whether present on the surface, or latent, or liminal?

For Adams, “Beauty that concerns me is that of form. Beauty is in my view a synonym for coherence and structure underlying life... beauty is the overriding demonstration of pattern that one observes.” For Adams, art, and its beauty, combats the unspoken notion that the world is a chaotic one, and it brings order to that chaotic world. Weston found that a photograph is the result of finding “amazement at subject matter,” which is to say the world. In this, Weston and Adams echo Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s way of understanding the world, and therefore the universe: one of “radical amazement.” Art gives witness to the splendor of the world, but that world is far too intense to examine or know directly, intimately, or in toto. This is the way Moses saw or approached God. We are told that God placed Moses between two rocks, and then allowed him to only see His back as he moved over him. If visual art is about seeing, then it is about light, which allows us to see. Light is then the manifestation of God’s benevolence at letting us see, or witness, the world; but we can never take it all in, but instead only encounter it in fragments, or see it in photographs or pictures, a small piece or chunk at a time. The apprehension of the totality of nature and its wonder is beyond the capability of humans.

“Photographing Evil” is really a meditation on whether there can, or should be, any intersection between the artist and social

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responsibility, or between art and the representation of evil, a problem that bedevils the larger art world today. There is an intrinsic friction between the artist and the problem of evil, or the various categories of bad human behavior (murder, avarice) or the problems of the human condition (poverty and the poor). It is Adams' contention that art combats this by finding and representing the order of the world, which creates an optimism about confronting the human condition. If good and evil are constants in the world—and they certainly seem to be so—the artist by his work, which is presenting beauty to humankind, performs a social good. That is his *greatest* responsibility. He also believes, with the exception of the portrayal of evil in Biblical stories, that the best art portrays an optimistic spirit. This flies in the face, and rightly so, of the current notion that all art should now be placed at the forefront in the fight against “systemic racism,” “poverty,” and climate change.

This has been demonstrated in the worst of times and places. The Jewish poet, Abraham Sutzkever, who survived life in the Vilna Ghetto during the Holocaust, described in his diary, the ghetto's cultural life of theatre, art, and music. The theatrical director Viskind said “Let us create a theater to delight and embolden the ghetto.” An art exhibit in March 1943 included colorful landscapes, graphic art, sketches by an architect, and a picture by nine-year old Samuel Bak. The orchestra of seventeen musicians, who worked as slave laborers during the day, gave a first performance that featured the *Caucasian Sketches* by Ippolitov-Ivanov, a Jewish potpourri of Max Geyger, and part of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. The Symphony inspired the ghetto population like mountain air for those with lung disease. It was worth fighting for beauty in the world.”¹ Adams thinks this is the optimistic spirit to which art and photography lead us. For him, all art is “the product of concern....it has social utility...it is designed to give us courage.”

Adams' take on the New is that there is really nothing much new, except for our particular angle taken on the old verities of coherence, form, and meaning. While there may be change over time, there is no such thing as artistic progress: “only innocence would be freedom, and one cannot recapture that: as long as we respond to our forebears they are with us.” This is not to say that art can't be

¹ Sutzkever, translated by Justin Cammy, *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2021.

improved, as the introduction of perspective in art proves, or that new formal ideas, like polyphony and harmony in music, can't bring wonderful developments. But the new doesn't negate the old, and is hardly "better."

Adams asks if it isn't still obligatory for the artist to at least be "fresh." Should his work not be "different from what has come before"? The answer is it should indeed be fresh, but with the caveat that all artists learn, borrow, and even steal from other artists. Their works, by necessity, must engage in a dialogue with the past. An artist must start his own artistic endeavors with previous examples: the young musician playing already pre-existent music; the artist or sculptor seeing paintings and sculptures as a youth; and the photographer seeing and taking pictures. And all these students study with masters of their craft. To suggest otherwise would be the height of foolishness, as "creations out of nothing are possible only for God." No serious artist, though, tries to recreate another's vision. The artist must know that he sees or hears something that has not been seen or heard before. If not, he should not be a creator, for he must produce something fresh because we treasure and seek this form of newness and surprise. The world has changed, certainly more in the last 200 years than in the previous two millennia, and artists help us learn, absorb, confront, and delight in these never-ending changes.

So while there is nothing completely new, there can be a fresh take on our present. Styles may change, but unless they cohere and bring meaning to their audience, they are sterile. Adams reveals a certain weariness even about his own medium: "photography is a cold medium: it can be expressive, but relatively less so than other kinds of graphics, and I occasionally enjoy more the warmth of pencil lines or brush strokes." This is an important caveat about the photographic art he has been pursuing and practicing his entire life, and may even reflect some hesitation about regarding photography as an art form on the same level as painting and sculpture.

Adams says that the notion of beauty in photography is ultimately not an ideational argument or matter, but rather something of human experience. The artist will find new media with which to express their ideas, feelings, and intuitions to their audience, and photography is one of those. After all, hasn't art always been in partnership with *techné*, moving from the wall to the canvas, and the wooden flute to one made of platinum? Adams knows that there will continue to be great photographers, painters and sculptors, and composers, who will bring freshness, skill and craft, and individuality to their art, who will bring us, their audience, to a state of speechless wonder and awe. That is, after all, the purpose of all true art. A