

AFFINITIES

Selections from the Comer Collection

Curated by Melanie Levin, Master of Fine Arts Candidate

My father recently gave me a keepsake of his, a candy box, decorated with flowers and the words "For Mother". This Mother's Day memento, given to his mother many years ago, contained a valuable treasure. This box held a precious collection of images, those fractional moments captured in time, depicting places familiar to me—evidence of my ancestry. These mysterious images are the visual documents and proof of my lineage that intrinsically connect me to the subjects within and the unseen participants behind the lens. The people, places and emotions seen in this small collection of images belonging to my grandmother, passed down to my father and now to me, represent temporal moments of time that preserve a thread of my humanity, connecting my past to present. These images stir my soul.

What compels a person to view photographs such as these? What are the characteristics within a collection that makes the images so powerful that they stimulate the viewer to examine the cultural signs and symbols found within? What dynamic occurs when the person behind the lens composes and responds by capturing the objects seen within the frame and preserving the moment in time? And finally, when the image is later seen, what are the mysterious elements within an image, which trigger an emotional response by those who view it? The result of this interaction among photographer, subject, image and viewer creates a dynamic visual communication, much like a language.

Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* uses terms such as *studium* and *punctum* to examine questions like these. The *studium*, Barthes explains, is that "unary" (40) aspect of an image that may appear both "common and banal" (41). Barthes describes the *studium* as those aspects of an image that are "reportage", "cultural" and mere "scenes" (25). Barthes compares the quality of a photograph as follows; "The *studium* is that very wide field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, of inconsequential taste; *I like/I don't like*" (27). The *studium* suggests the documentary qualities of a photograph like a portrait or an everyday street scene that we recognize and understand. Barthes tells us that the photographer, according to *studium*, can create a myth through imagery "to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire" (28). The *studium* aspect can include a historical reference or even a shocking component, but the image typically does not evoke a deeply personal connection with the viewer.

Conversely, the *punctum* is the element within a photograph, which pricks our heart, soul, and mind. Barthes says, "Very often the *punctum* is a 'detail,' *i.e.*, a partial object within the image that stirs us. Hence, to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*" (43). Something within the image triggers a response, connecting the viewer to a personal perception,



knowledge or memory. Certain photographs draw us in and reveal to us the spirit of their contents. Barthes elaborates:

The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me... A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me but also bruises me, is poignant to me. (26-27)

It is this surprise phenomenon, the *punctum*, which leaves a lasting impression upon the viewer. The *punctum*, as Barthes explains, is that detail that causes a reaction, "which makes me add something to the photograph." (45) A catalytic process occurs in that the observer of the image engages in creating additional meaning.

In Practices of Looking, an Introduction to Visual Culture, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright corroborate Barthes' reference to *punctum* and *studium* and discuss the photographic "truth" of an image. Photographs were used as "evidence of the real" to substantiate incidents such as the Holocaust. Yet, in trying to identify meaning, photographs can be viewed and interpreted in many different

ways depending on the viewer's experiences. Sturken and Cartwright relay that, "The meaning of photographs can thus be seen as somewhat paradoxical in that they can be emotional objects through the *punctum*, or the emotional piercing quality, yet they can also, through the effect of the *studium*, serve as banal traces of the real, documentary evidence of something that simply has happened" (18). Each individual brings personal experiences, perceptions and memories to the act of viewing that result in a broad variety of interpretations. Sturken and Cartwright suggest that rather than the photograph being a representation of truth, it becomes a "culturally inflected" myth (17-18).

The photographer acts as a filter by translating the subjects and objects seen through the lens. The visual elements captured within the frame can often infer literal or symbolic meaning when seen by the viewer—creating a new shared visual language between photographer and viewer. And furthermore, once the moment is preserved, it becomes a historical record of the past...now dead. Barthes illustrates this relationship as follows:

I observe that a photograph can be of three practices ...to do, to undergo, and to look. The *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs... [T]he person or thing photographed is the target, the referent...[,]which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph,...a relation to "spectacle" ...[--] which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. (9-10)

In this exhibition, selected images from the Comer Collection containing symbols that include visual elements from our culture, society and history are arranged in a sequence referencing the human lifespan. This sequence, reflective of the aging process from birth to death, serves as an homage to Barthes, given his emphasis on childhood (the image of his mother) and death (her passing). The selections are evaluated based on qualities and characteristics that accentuate Barthes' idea of *punctum* and/or *studium*. As curator, I will discuss the possible relationship between the photographer, the content captured within the frame and the impact the image creates for the viewer. And finally, I will explore the concept of an image as it references death—a moment frozen in time as expressed by Barthes.

In *First Five Minutes*, 1959, Eve Arnold captures an image representing that intimate connection between a mother and her newborn shortly following birth. Arnold's use of close-cropping and exclusion of facial features invites the viewer into this personal scene—the second the mother and child form their delicate bond. The fragile hand with the tiny hospital bracelet symbolizes the newness of life and becomes the *punctum*. Arnold succeeds in capturing this touching transitory moment, between mother and child. Barthes reveals, "It is by this tenuous umbilical cord"—the ability for the photographer to connect with the viewer—"that the photographer gives life" (110).

In Paula Willmot Kraus' *Beth/Shadow Fears*, 1993, we experience a visual representation of the transition from infancy to childhood awareness, as portrayed by a young girl clutching her cat in a dark room with shadows. The

image depicts a foreboding scene, evoking thoughts of day and night, light and dark, referencing life and death. Barthes notes, "The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah...[and] allow the detail to rise up its own accord to affective consciousness." (55). Attention is directed to the young girl, who appears, at first glance, to be alone, lying on a hardwood floor. She is propped up like a doll, near a window in a sparse room. The light cascading through the window creates shadows of lines and bars that frame the child, suggesting entrapment. Partially covering the child and her cat is a shadowy specter from an unknown onlooker extending an outstretched hand. The photographer's use of light and dark tones coupled with the shadow engulfing the small child creates an ominous and threatening mood. The child peering out of the darkness directs her calm yet knowing gaze to the viewer, compounding the mystery and increasing suspense. The image represents the fragility of innocence and vulnerability of youth. The concealed features of the child's face allow the viewer to project. The image suggests the anxiety one experiences as a child at night—the fear of darkness and the nightmares that accompany sleep.

Next, Andrea Modica's *Treadwell*, *New York*, 1990, portrays a symbolic representation of the relationship between two children. In this intimate portrait of young boys, we see the familiar struggle and the fragile balance between love and hate that exists within human relationships. The older brother appears to hold the younger one captive. The older boy's lips delicately touch the arm of the younger. Does the embrace of the two represent compassion or is the smaller of the two being held hostage by the larger? The younger boy reveals scars on his face and exposed chest. Are these marks the result of a recent injury, accident or fight? Does the younger child's expression portray emotional scars in addition to the physical ones? Or have the two boys just finished a healthy round of wrestling? Barthes reflects upon such an unsettling aspect of an image, "[W]hat I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstruction...but reality in a past state..." (82).

Modica's use of close cropping and backlighting succeeds in creating this mood of uncertainty that is both silent and somber. The youth shy away from the direct gaze of the camera's lens and, with the absence of eye contact and the lack of recognizable facial features, the viewer is allowed to project their own emotions on the depiction of this private exchange. The photographic document reveals a time and location yet one wonders where the boys are now. This haunting moment captured by Modica suggests a visual representation of a familiar family dynamic, sibling rivalry, which suggests both the bond of brotherhood and the struggle for dominance and control.

In the next images from the Comer Collection, the theme of rites of passage is evident. In *Barefoot with Brent*, 1997, 1999, Patricia D. Richards captures a teenage couple, engaged in an episode of the coming of age experience. The social and cultural details included within the frame contain a slice of everyday life—growing up in the suburbs—punctuated by major events such as Prom and Homecoming dances. Details within the image, the subjects clothing—jeans and formal gown, a 1980s model car and a contemporary tract home, suggest a particular period of suburban Americana during the late 20th century. These elements represent Barthes' historical *studium*. The subjects are recorded

at this transitional life moment. The young woman haphazardly clutches her elegant dress and strikes a cocky pose while standing in the middle of the street. She is barefoot, happy and carefree in her shades, pearls and gown. In contrast, the young man, bare-chested clad with sagging jeans, looks on, bored and unimpressed—with the gown, the girl and the photographer's intrusion into his world. The image contains a powerful *punctum*, the formal gown and pearls on the young woman, representing her transition from youth to adulthood, which connects to a time when each of us transitions through puberty.

Rufus O. Lovett's *Pauline*, is another document representing a young woman's passage. Pauline is caught in the middle of a high kick—a pose indicative of the Rangerette's drill team located in Lovett's town of Kilgore, Texas. She is dressed in a cookie-cutter costume, demonstrating perfect form, a competitive spirit, and confidence of her place in the world. The blurred foot reveals movement as Pauline performs for her spectator. Barthes alludes to the photographer's well-timed action in that, "the essential gesture of the *Operator* is to surprise something or someone... , and that this gesture is perfect when it is performed unbeknownst to the subject being photographed" (32). Lovett's contorted close-cropped image of the high kick caught in freeze frame emphasizes this bizarre tradition found in small town Texas. The image illustrates the cultural pressure imposed on young women driven to compete with hopes of achieving this odd stereotypical ideal.

Just as Lovett's *Pauline* portrays the iconic female archetype, Danny Lyon illustrates his ability to snatch a stereotypical moment of a young man's life in *Demo Driver*. With arms hanging out a car window, this youth watches events that occur outside of our view. He is caught in his moment enjoying a smoke while dreaming of his turn to compete and win a race. His mood is somber and pensive. We see his car—painted and door chained shut. He is prepped to go. His greasy finger nails, flannel shirt and tattooed hand give us insight into the driver's lifestyle and commitment to racing. He appears unaware of the photographer and doesn't seem to care about his audience. He resides in his own world, for this moment, frozen in time. Images such as these, Barthes suggests, make us "dream" of what might occur. (49) In a distance, we see steel and wreckage of another driver's crash. The signs and symbols included in this image suggest a male gender stereotype, which associates drag racing, risk-taking and danger with a real man.

Ernst Haas' Vienna, 1946-1948 *Homecoming Prisoner* demonstrates a powerful example of Barthes' *studium*, by inviting us to share a prisoner's viewpoint as he returns home from war. We experience his reentry into his suspended present. His prosthetic leg is vertically positioned in his knapsack, with toe tipping to a faraway church steeple. Although he is equipped with only one leg, he is perfectly balanced with the help of his cane, poignantly placed in the center of town square. We share his point of view, standing on the brink of his lonely return. Haas uses lines within the roads, angles from the buildings, the trees and the prisoner's crutches to pull us into the image, and down the road that leads ahead. The shock and position of the removed prosthetic leg placed in opposition to its rightful location offer us the *punctum*, the missing leg, which is the costly payment for participating in war.

Berenice Abbott's, *El Station, 6th & 9th*, 1936, is another example of life's passages and Barthes' *studium* and *punctum*. Abbott shows a wide angle cityscape of a moment in time, 1936, when travelers are waiting, forever, to resume their journey in life during the Great Depression. The turnstile in the foreground invites us into the scene. The angles, lines and shadows draw our eyes to the three main figures passing through the station. The subjects within the photograph are well dressed for winter in coats, suits, fur and gloves. A strange interaction occurs between the subjects and the viewer. The subjects gaze back at the photographer and equally draw the viewer in, to connect with the image. One subject stands forward, one subject stands by a pot belly stove watching while he warms by the fire, and another turns as if she is about to leave the scene. These three different points of view suggest an entry, a place to wait and an exit; there is a door on the left, a door on the right, and a turnstile in front with a token slot and an "Entrance" sign, suggesting possible directions to take in our journey with the travelers. The converging and contrasting lines created by the window frames, walls, doors, pole and gate provide a visual path, inviting the viewer into the scene. The light, reflections, and shadows in the room increase the multiple dimensions of this historical transition captured in the moment. We are forever waiting at the El with these individuals, whose destinations and futures are unknown. The image is an historical reminder that speaks volumes about the uncertainty of the economy, the future and any moment of life in general.

Finally, Luis Mallo's *Passengers*, 1995, presents an example of both *punctum* and *studium* in this fitting conclusion to the sequence of photographs from the Comer Collection. We see a partial image of a person wrapped in a heavy cloth coat working knitting needles. This simple document could be described as a banal scene, the *studium*. However, the angle and cropped composition of the image creates a dynamic between the photographer, the subject and the viewer. The hands with their knitting needles are frozen in action. The subject's face remains concealed, hidden behind the frame. The title, *Passengers* implies the



photographer is documenting a moment with another traveler on their journey through life. We observe the process of knitting in a new light, as the stitch is preserved, one of hundreds, repeated over time. The instant becomes a specter of what Barthes refers to as “That-has-been” (79). The repetitive motion of the hands and needles are a symbolic gesture representing the motion of the hands on a clock, “a stitch- in- time.” The act of knitting is rhythmic, like the beating of a heart, and produces a wearable object. With time, this knitted wrap is later worn, but remains perishable and wears out. The aged hands –bony and thin— suggest evidence of the passage of decades. The *punctum* is the very evidence of the act of knitting, a dying art that was once a part of our culture. The death of the moment is preserved as needle points touch, yet never resume their motion.

As shown through this selection of photographs, and illuminated by references from Barthes text, a relationship exists among the photographer as the visual communicator, the subject or object within the frame, and the viewer’s interpretation and emotional response to each image. The impact of the symbols contained within the frame strengthens the image, when combined with the viewer’s perception and knowledge of their historical context. The image can “speak” to the viewer creating a visual language as Barthes reveals, alluding to the subject’s essence (72). Upon the instant the photograph is taken, the moment becomes history and approaches death.

The Comer Collection photographs richly display examples of Barthes’ *punctum* and/or *studium*. They invite the viewer to actively participate in what the eye sees and the heart feels. The images often leave the viewer with an untimely after-effect, an imprint, preserved in memory. The moments within the images are dead and provide haunting traces referencing history, human fragility and mortality, just like the images contained in the candy box that were bequeathed to me by my father.

Images such as these are reflective of our human journey beginning with birth, through life to death. They can suggest elements of truth, myth or essence. Barthes shares consequence of this process as follows: “Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits...; mad if this realism is absolute and...original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time...” (119). As we examine images such as these, to reflect and collect, we struggle to understand. Barthes references the madding evidence documented by the “has-been”, which represents something we know and with which we desire to connect—but cannot (77). Yet, somehow, in this process, we locate a thread within the image that connects us to each other and our mortality, we identify the *punctum* and/or *studium*, and we experience a catalytic response that withstands time and binds us together to form a shared affinity.



REFERENCES

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- Garner, Gretchen. *Disappearing Witness, Change in Twentieth-Century American Photography*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. Print.
- Van Haften, Julia. *Aperture Masters of Photography Number Nine, Berenice Abbott*. New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1988. Print.

IMAGES

- front: Modica, Andrea, *Treadwell, New York*, 1990, gelatin silver, 8” x10”
 inside: Richards, Patricia D., *Barefoot with Brent*, 1997/1999, gelatin silver, 8”x10”
 back: Mallo, Luis, *Passengers*, 1995, gelatin silver, 5.2” x7.8”



Opening Reception: Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2 – 4 p.m., University Theatre
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