



SOCIAL / SCENE

An Exhibition of Works from the Comer Collection

Berenice Abbott

Dawoud Bey

Peter Brown

Laura Calfee

Paula Chamlee

Matt Herron

Bob Hower

Mark Klett

Arthur Leipzig

Danny Lyon

Duane Michals

Charles Moore

Richard Newman

John Pfahl

June Van Cleef

Marion Post Wolcott

Reception and Gallery Talk: November 4, 2 – 4 p.m., Cecil and Ida Green Center, The University of Texas at Dallas

Related Lecture: November 12, 7:30 p.m., Visual Arts Building, Room AS 1.105

Lorraine Davis, *"The Famous, the Infamous, the Anonymous: A History of Portraiture in Photography"*

Curated by Diane Durant McGurren, October 31 – December 13, 2008





Paula Chamlee, *Creitz Farm*, from series *High Plains Farm*, 1994, silver chloride, 9.6" x 7.7"

**Reading Photographs:
The Narrative Voice in Social/Scene**

He gently cleans the sweat from his brow with an already compromised sleeve and methodically replaces his hat atop his head. The misshapen straw Stetson has shaded his face for years, though hard lines and leathery skin still tell of days spent in the open air. Tugging at his gloves, he stares into the sun and makes note of the hour. The cicadas hum deep in his ears as drops of sweat resume their fall down his temple. He settles his shovel into a groove in the ground, steps up on its rusted metal edge, and thrusts hard with both boot and back. In one fluid motion, he slices West Texas soil—so rocky, so rich. Over and over again he invades the earth's surface, digging an irrigation ditch for the north pasture, preparing for early rains. Or maybe he's repairing the well line, burying it deeper in cool soil. Or extending a new one, bringing it up closer to the house. After all, it's been an unusually dry year.

In my mind, I envision T.S. Redford as cowboy, rancher, good ol' boy. And I know him. He is everyman, or my grandfather, or your grandfather, and his life is a story we've heard before—one that we want to hear again. Granted privileged access through June Van Cleef's 1983 photograph, *T.S. Redford, Lund Ranch*, we settle into a chair on the other side of the coffee table, on the other side of the image. Seated directly across from him—I am, and so are you—we are shown vignettes of a van-

ishing way of life, of Mr. Redford, of Lund Ranch, of the textures in the rug, the couch, the blanket, and of Mr. Redford's misshapen cowboy hat. In the image, as in life, he is seated on a couch, one leg crossed over the other to reveal the stitching in his cowboy boots—undoubtedly the pride of a man. A decorative lamp towers beside him, emitting a mellow glow as natural light creeps in below the window shade and reflects softly on the wood floor. Complimentary to the narrative we have written in our minds, we witness T.S. Redford at rest, inside his private domain, and further feel a sense of intimacy, of privilege, of access granted us by both photographer and subject. As he waits for his photograph to be taken—a dignified, though atypical, portrait of a workingman—we wait for another story to be told, for T.S. Redford to reveal more of himself than we can even imagine, more than that which is revealed in pictures.

"When I was your age," he begins, and the plot develops, action rising. But first, the setting: we are transported to another time and place, a time when life was simpler and the days longer, a place called home that smells of fried chicken or peach cobbler, of dried earth or impending rain. A character in and of itself, we can almost picture the scene, hear the chirping of tree frogs, feel sun beating down on our backs, smell the fresh air—and it's in another photograph. Paula Chamlee's *Creitz Farm*, from her *High Plains Farm* series, becomes the backdrop for the narrative, one that could write T.S. Redford as its protagonist. So the story continues. We go where our narrator leads,



Laura Calfee, *Cricket & Joy*, 1998, Ilfochrome print, 14" x 11"

stepping out of ourselves and into the image, into accounts of daily labor, the toil over the land and the brittle grass that crackles at every step, our feet almost solid on earth that seems to extend for eternity. Power lines drape across the vast Texas sky as we stand before tractors, a barn and the quintessential abandoned car—the one we pretended to drive when we were younger, the one that, even though the wheels never moved an inch, took us a thousand miles away in our minds.

If we could go that far in the real world, we could see mountains. The engine rumbles and the transmission sputters but we bounce along, a travel narrative across the American landscape that takes us from the known to the unknown, from the present to the past. Flat lands become rolling hills, plains to plateaus, and suddenly what we imagine is right before our eyes. Standing before the Solitario Mountains with the sun beating at our backs, our shadow projects into the scene, casting evidence of our presence into the survey-like photograph so reminiscent of those taken in the nineteenth century. We have traveled in both time and space, observing a natural landscape that has evolved (or maybe even devolved) over the years through the same rains and droughts, sunbeams and snowfalls that have shaped the plains, shaped Lund Ranch and Creitz Farm. Mark Klett's 1989 photograph *Standing before the Solitario Mountains* takes us there, back to a time that has vanished, and asks us to don our own boots and spurs, tip our hats to passing strangers, perhaps mount a faithful steed or set out in search

for black gold. *That* story is yet to be written.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, T.S. Redford continues his flashback, telling tales of the Depression, of walking to school uphill, both ways, in the snow. He cracks a smile with his eyes, our cue to laugh, but tears start to well up around pupils that have seen too much, and so we wait. Sitting back in our chair, we wait to turn the page on another story, another photograph. He leans forward, elbows to knees, and nods his head.

"Yep. Times were tough in those days," he says with a peaceful resolve, "but we made it." He wrings his hands together, taking a deep breath, and our eyes shift to a different image. This time, a boy, innocent, unassuming, distracts himself atop a wooden wagon several times his size. "Those days" become something we can actually see, those of us who have only heard about it in History class. And we can feel it, too. The wind blowing the young boy's hair whips across our faces as well. Marion Post Wolcott's 1934 image, *Young Boy on Wagon*, speaks to us from the past and, like T.S. Redford, invites us in to an experience, a narrative, rich in memory, nostalgia, suspense and revelation. Which character is this? What's his story? We don't know, and so we ask.

"Excuse me," we say, "but what's your name?"

Nothing.

He's busy. The boy obviously can't be bothered. The other children have been bartering for his time for the past hour, but the empty wagon offers too much of a distraction, the small

shovel too much potential. Even though, at first read, we aren't given a satisfactory answer, we are still compelled to stay, to allow the story to develop—the story of a boy whose family lost all they had during the Depression. Or whose older brother was crippled by polio. Or who wanted a BB gun for Christmas. We laugh at his innocence, his imagination, his proclivity for mischief, and take time to explore our surroundings. Another little boy promises to show us around the property, give us a first-person account of the time he was scolded for running through the yard, for scaring the chickens. He takes our hand and opens our eyes to another real world.

Again, though this time in vivid color, the setting emerges as our main character. Inside Laura Calfee's *Cricket and Joy*—inside the McMurtry house—we take a long, hard look out the kitchen window, feeling that same sense of privilege that we felt in T.S. Redford's home. He could be here, actually, but instead we listen to the McMurtry's stories, great storytellers that they are, and compose a narrative of the everyday, of the countryside, of home. The image captures a stark white shed against a perfectly blue sky, but the signs of everyday life are revealed in the smaller things: the tiny contour of a cricket caught in the window screen and a clear bottle of soap, half empty. We hear other crickets chirping and breathe deep the fresh country air—the window itself opened just enough to let the outside in. Flies buzz against the screen as we help Mrs. McMurtry with lunch: chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes and a white gravy so thick you can scoop it up with a fork. She tells us about her grandmother's recipe for cherry pie and we beg for her to share.

"Oh dear, I don't know the measurements," she says apologetically. "I've been making it for so long that I just put in whatever looks about right." She flashes a gentle, southern smile, shuffles across the parquet floor and pours herself another glass of iced tea, freshly brewed. "Can I offer you some?"

We take another look out the window, soak in the particulars with eyes that haven't seen enough, and join her at the kitchen table. Iced tea sure would hit the spot.

"Tell us about *Mr.* McMurtry," we say with expectancy and a bit of jest, raising the glass to our lips. She chuckles and tosses her head back. We grin in anticipation of her narrative voice, welcomed into this home, into this image.

Glancing back through the window, we see past the McMurtry's shed to Creitz Farm and Lund Ranch. A young boy hunkers down on a wooden wagon as mountains loom large in the distance. We see photographs, but then we see beyond them. As a part of the real world, we read in these photographs our social histories, our biographies, our creative nonfictions, and then we all write our own subplots. We become protagonists and antagonists, foil our own falling action, and maybe even add twists to our own perfect endings.

The images in this exhibition all function as texts in a larger photographic discourse. They, too, write their own narratives—explicating and expanding upon the world around us, the world as it can only be revealed in pictures, as it can only be imagined in the narration of our lives. But these images also reveal multiple truths, welcome multiple interpretations, and thus a different set of images—a different set of texts—will tell a different story, or at least tell it from a different point-of-view. Instead of a novella set in rural Texas, another set of images tells a tale of New York City. Duane Michals's *New York (rain)* opens our story in medias res. Through a blur of motion, we see two men crossing an almost deserted city street to escape the gray, hazy downpour. They cross the image and cross our paths as we side-step a puddle of runoff and rain. Taken back twenty-five years to cross the same city streets, Arthur Leipzig shows us two children behind a shop window. We converse with them as best we can and listen for the story of *their* lives—two children's narration of hand laundries, discrimination and making ends meet. Taken back another ten years, we can continue a New York narrative with Berenice Abbott's image, *El Station, Sixth and Ninth Lines, Manhattan*. As a series, these images contribute to the story of our lives, of New York, of times changing and Times Square, but they are not complete in and of themselves. Other chapters lay open in other photographs, even beyond what we initially observe.

Details of the narrative often lie outside the frame and develop as the viewer sees fit, as the viewer *sees*. The challenge is not only to *look* at images, but to *read* them, ask them to tell their story and then be willing to listen to their narrative voices, to be entertained, and pass it on. Though June Van Cleef showed us the portrait of a working man who was, uncharacteristically, at rest, we know that the story of Redford's life includes the action and drama of the West—a true rural cowboy's life replete with breakin' horses and brandin' cattle, shuckin' corn and shellin' peas. So in keeping with the genre, T.S. Redford rides off into a deep orange sunset. Tomorrow he will head back to the north pasture to continue work on the irrigation ditch. Or the old well line. Or the new one. Though it feels like the dénouement, the story continues, because as long as there are photographs to read, there will be dialogues to write, sequels, prequels and alternate endings—new images with new narrative voices.

— Diane Durant McGurren

Cover: June Van Cleef, *T.S. Redford, Lund Ranch*, silver gelatin print, 12" x 9", 1982/97

Cecil and Ida Green Center hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m. - 10 p.m. Saturday and Sunday: Closed

The University of Texas at Dallas School of Arts & Humanities, MS JO31, 800 W. Campbell Rd., Richardson, TX 75080-3021
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