

AN ORIGINAL SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS ACCOMPANIED BY A TEXT

by

John Messina

Bachelor of Architecture - Louisiana State University

1965

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree Master of Architecture in Advanced Studies

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June, 1977

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ABSTRACT

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In order to more intelligently make and view photographs it seems necessary to, first of all, attempt an understanding of just what is the photographic image. Historically, image making has been an inseparable element in the development of human culture. By the time the first photographic processes were announced in the early part of the 19th century people were prepared to accept the medium with a propensity verging on passion. The popularity of photography was astonishing and people flocked by the millions to have their portraits made. This was somewhat curious, for when the gramophone was invented, people didn't seek records of their voices. But the camera became a "portrait machine." Some historians like Michael Lesy seek the reasons for this in psychology, metaphysics and magic. Others such as Rudisill tend to stress the idea of the image as replica - often sentimentally charged. Gradually the idea of the photograph as a substitute for the thing imaged began to change. The first ostensible indication of this revision was with the work of photographic pictorialists. They tended to depart from the "world of things" to more expressive avenues of picture making. Unfortunately, their modes were usually derived from painting and they avoided the inherent characteristics of the photographic medium. More recently there has been an awareness that photography is not as akin to painting as one might initially think. Its dependence upon external conditions and the highly descriptive quality of its nature, commit it more to "pure seeing" and its subsequent pleasures. Louis Mumford saw every photograph as "essentially a snapshot," attempting to externalize and make permanent a "unique esthetic moment" found in the infinite number of possibilities. He was aware that, when the photograph extracted external phenomena from its context, new relationships and meanings were created. Also, relationships and meanings that might have "otherwise defied observation" are revealed. The photograph's abstract quality and its ability to confirm bias makes it take on a fictive nature. "It hovers

between fact and point of view." The medium lends itself to randomness and ambiguity and it is this indeterminate quality that provides much of the interest of a successful photograph. The purpose of photography, like fine wine, good fishing and professional baseball, is the pleasure it provides. Through the photographic image the pleasure of sight is manifested and the nature of things, rather than revealed, are shown.

The second section attempts to deal with specific concerns related to the included photographs that were also on exhibit from May 3 to May 25, 1977 at the M.I.T. Creative Photography Gallery. The photographs express an inexhaustible fascination with the external world, especially that which has been built by man. It is the encounter/collaboration, between myself and the physical world that has produced these pictures.

The things photographed are commonplace and, while not only providing raw material, they tend to represent the modest but very real endeavors and aspirations of their builders. Like an explorer I seek enrichment from discovery and inclusion of "slowly seen detail." The surface manifestations of man are what photography describe best and it is in this that I am interested. Let us not forget that these photographs are translations of ideas from one form to another. They are "made not born." Lately, I have been attempting ambiguity and indeterminateness in the images. The viewer should extend his own imagination beyond the frame and allow this undefined territory to become an integral part of the image. In the sequencing of the following photographs chronology, rather than serial, dominates.

Thesis Supervisor:

Wayne V. Andersen
Professor of the History of Art

Acknowledgements

I wish to express particular gratitude to Professor Wayne V. Andersen for not only his perceptive criticism in the capacity of thesis advisor, but also for the tremendous intellectual stimulation generated from his keen, inventive and adventurous mind. He has generously and courageously shared his ideas with me and any interested students. I am indebted to Jonathan Green who, while an Associate Professor at the Creative Photography Laboratory, encouraged me to do graduate work in photography at M.I.T., and from whom I learned a gentle yet intense method of looking at photographs. My sincerest thanks to Eugenia Parry Janis, Associate Professor of Art History at Wellesley College, for her accessibility and the many intense discussions we have had concerning the history and theory of photography. Peter Laytin, Assistant Professor at the Creative Photography Laboratory, has my deepest appreciation for the constant support that he has given to all my schemes and proposals during the past two years.

It has been my good fortune that Rotch Library of M.I.T. has an acquisitions librarian in the person of Florence Doksansky. Through her intelligence and cooperation we have collaborated in building onto an existing fine collection of photography titles, a fact that has made my research much easier.

Finally, to Minor White, whom I never had the pleasure of studying with but, who over a ten year period built the Creative Photography Laboratory into a superb working environment, I posthumously dedicate this first M.I.T. graduate degree in photography.

Introduction

To some future reader I owe a debt of explanation as to why an ostensible Master of Architecture Degree candidate has attempted for a thesis the production of pure, inexplicable photographs. Although trained as an architect I am, and have been for the past nine years, first and foremost, a photographer. Having decided to concentrate on graduate studies in photography, M.I.T., with its Creative Photography Laboratory and tremendous resources, seemed a wise choice. My first degree in architecture and past accomplishment in the field of photography gained admission for me into the advanced photography program of the Department of Architecture.

As a thesis subject I selected to produce an original body of creative photographs. The photographs are to be exhibited from May 3 to May 25, 1977 at the Creative Photography Gallery on the M.I.T. campus. Approximately fifty of these photographs have been contact printed and included in this volume. Accompanying the photographs is a text that attempts to give emphasis to ontological and historical problems related to the work. This writing, which is an accumulation of the research, reading, and thinking on photography that I have undertaken during the past two years, is divided into two sections. The first section asks the question, what is the photographic image? and the second part deals more directly with specific concerns related to the following group of photographs.

Nine months ago I wrote in my thesis proposal: I have a notion that anything can be photographed and become a photograph. The trick is that the image must

be simultaneously ambiguous, paradoxical, mesmerizing, symbolic and full of tacit mystery, all of which are the characteristics of a successful photograph. Like snapshots, they should describe everything and reveal almost nothing. But most importantly, they should be photographic. By example of the following photographs and, dialectically, by means of the text, I hope to successfully defend this notion.

What Is The Photographic Image?

During the early part of 1839, a remarkable event occurred that was to permanently alter the visual perception of the literate world. Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre's invention, called by his own name, the daguerreotype, was announced to the public. The people of Paris stood in lines five blocks long in order to view displayed examples of this radically new and prodigious pictorial medium. Significantly, the daguerreotype was brought into being not by a chemist or a physicist, but through the vision and persistence of a painter - a maker of images - as M. Daguerre had been. Although various scientists had contributed invaluable to the workability of this imaging process, it was the professional illusionist whose needs were so great that all obstacles were finally overcome. Henry Fox Talbot, Daguerre's main competitor for the inventor of photography honor, although an amateur scientist, pursued and perfected his calotype process primarily because of a frustration with his inability to draw. Like a fireside bellows this excessive desire for illusion has continually stoked the photographic process.

The illusion formed by translating a three dimensional phenomenon onto a two dimensional surface has been an inseparable element in the development of human culture. The cave drawings of the paleolithic period bear witness to this observation. Whatever their code hides, these icons of the inner-sanctum unequivocally state their makers' need for some sort of permanent record. As this requirement for permanency by representation was passed along through the ages it was the Renaissance with its linear perspective that set the visual terms for the photograph. The film camera was a logical development from the Renaissance's mechanized vision. (We shall see

later how this mechanization, far from destroying expressiveness, actually provided it with support.) When the first photographic processes were announced in the early part of the 19th century they were received by a culture that was prepared with a propensity verging on passion.

One of the most obvious things that photography did almost immediately upon its inception was to make these permanent images available to the public in a mass manner. The medium was truly a democratic process and, especially in America, spiritually entered into the mainstream of Jeffersonian principles. Its popularity spread so rapidly and with so much vigor that, ironically, this egalitarian of media forced many minor painters out of business. The question arises as to what did people tend to put into these permanent photographic images? A clue might be found in the fact that of the millions of daguerreotypes made in America between 1840 and 1856, and of the thousands that have survived the ravages of age, only one out of ten thousand would be a landscape, an architectural or, generally speaking, a non-studio shot. If we can accurately judge by those countless images that escaped the oppressive heat of attic trunks and the vengeance of hurt loves, then what people chose to image was themselves. For reasons that we can only conjecture, it was portraiture that immensely dominated the first phase of photography. In fact, the growth of the portrait studio business was astonishing. By 1850 every city and most towns were serviced by a daguerreotypist ¹ many of whom would produce an image for as little as twenty-five U.S. cents.² Perhaps this tremendous popularity was due simply to the fact that the images were accessible and seemed like a good "yankee" bargain. However, some historians such as

Michael Lesy and Richard Rudisill feel that there is much more involved than ease and thrift. Stanley Milgram, a psychologist, poses the question: "When the gramophone was invented, people didn't seek records of their voices. But the camera became a portrait machine. Why?"³ Lesy is not satisfied with a "it's only natural" answer to this question. He hints at metaphysics when he writes:

".....when the early daguerreotypists went out into the small towns, they were hailed not as craftsmen, copyists, or memorialists, but as varieties of mesmerists and phrenologists, one of whom could read the mind through trance, the other through the shape of the skull. The daguerreotypists were called Professor and were believed to practice a character magic that trapped light and used the dark to reveal the truth of a soul that shone through a face. These men may have been hacks and they may have been opportunists, but they moved through a population that lived in the midst of a commercial, political and spiritual crisis that lasted a generation and that ended with carnage and assassination. The craft they practiced and the pictures they made were the result not only of the conventional rationalism of an applied technology but of irrational needs that must be understood psychologically." ⁴

The word "magic" was often used in the 19th century to describe the effects of both the process and product of photography. In fact, until around the 1870's photography

was considered by the masses to be certainly mystical, if not completely supernatural. Sitters for portraits would describe "a magnetic attraction" and "eyes drawn towards the lens." Ladies would often perceive an impression as if cold air were blowing on their faces and sometimes complain of a "pricking sensation." Perspiration and a sense of suffocation was common. ⁵ It was often said that while a person was being daguerretyped, a duration of approximately twenty seconds, his whole life would flash by him, not unlike the desperate recollections of a drowning man. Whether there was an affinity with the "spirits," an extension of alchemy, or simply the tropism to a new experience, these early images were definitely containers of enchantment.

Richard Rudisill tends to value the photographic image as a replica of something else. He often basis his interpretation of photography's popularity on this notion of the image as substitute. Later we shall see how this attitude alone can be more subterfuge than fact and could hinder a penetrating investigation of the medium's power. Once there is an understanding of the fictive properties of even the most "utilitarian photograph" then and only then can they be treated with intelligence, justice and propriety.

However pedestrian the replica theory may be, it is fair to say that for most 19th century citizens and many people today the photographic image is a partial substitute for the thing itself. Rudisill tells the story of the Quaker couple who, in response to their daughter's pleas, violated their sect's prohibition concerning "graven images" and had their photographic portrait made. This devout husband and wife crept along

alleys and, undisclosed to their fellow Quakers, entered through the back door into a daguerreotypist's studio - all of this to appease the spiritual wants of a soon to be married daughter who would be moving 300 miles away and perhaps never see them again save through this clandestine image. This was an extremely serious and elegiac undertaking, for in 1848 when this event took place, "Quakers did not take their religion lightly." In 1850 there was a shipwreck just off of the New York harbor. Fortunately all hands and passengers were rescued. However, when they were brought ashore it was learned that all cargo including baggage was lost. Immediately a man, one of those who had just escaped drowning, announced on the spot that he would pay a \$5000 reward for the salvage of an item among his possessions. That item was a daguerreotype of his deceased wife. In 1850, five thousand dollars was the equivalent of twenty-seven thousand dollars today. ⁶

Probably the most poignant story is one that appeared in the American Journal of Photography concerning a man who in 1858 appeared at the studio of a Union City, New Jersey daguerreotypist and requested that his wife be daguerreotyped. On learning that the lady was "dead and buried" the operator (as daguerreotypists were called) explained that a picture was not possible. After being questioned by the deceased woman's husband he did make assurances that any of her personal objects could be photographed. A short time later the man returned with a basket and

"proceeded to place the contents on the floor; first came a woman's bonnet, then a shawl, a gown came next, a pair of stockings and a pair of shoes

emptied the basket, no; not quite, a small parcel carefully laid on one side was unrolled, and two oranges, one of them half sucked was laid beside the apparel. Amazed, we looked on in silence; there was nothing there we could not take a picture of that was certain. 7

This assemblage transferred to a two dimensional surface was, given his options, an acceptable substitute to the man for his dead wife. For him the photograph was a way of externalizing and making somewhat permanent a vision of his beloved. It was in this same spirit that early photographers were not infrequently called upon to make posthumous portraits of children and occasionally of esteemed adults. A bitter-sweet tale is centered around the great expeditionary photographer William Henry Jackson. Upon his death at the age of ninety-nine, and after a life rich with adventure including several wives, his family found among his personal effects a daguerreotype of a Vermont girl he had loved seventy-six years earlier. 8

The substance of the above depositions will not allow one to easily dismiss the replica power of the photographic image, not can their quality of magical enchantment be facilely denied. Granted the examples cited have been portraits of human souls who in spite of their mortal failings still romantically endeared themselves to the holders of these images and thus sentiment was unobstructively applied. Nevertheless, there are examples of pets, livestock, livery, real estate, inventions, natural wonders and even disasters having been immortalized by the photographer's craft. But gradually, ever so slowly, this idea of the photograph as a substitute for the thing

imaged began to change.

The first ostensible indication of this change, at least in a major way, was with the work of pictorialists around the turn of the last century. They tended (for the wrong reason) to depart from the "world of things" to more expressive avenues of picture making. Unfortunately, their concerns were more of imitating outdated painting rather than wrestling with photography's inherent problems. Actually, photography is not as akin to painting or the other graphic arts as one might initially think. The process is determined by external conditions. There was an almost immediate awareness of this salient trait as indicated by a quote in the December, 1839 issue of the Knickerbocker Magazine.

"The daguerreotype will never do for portrait painting. Its pictures are quite too natural to please any other than very beautiful sitters. 9

From the very beginning, photographers and realist painters had little more in common than subject matter - one by choice, the other by necessity. Instead of accepting photography's incredible ability at realism, the pictorialists saw it as a detriment and resorted to self-defeating artifice in their avoidance. Ironically, it was this tremendous descriptive quality that they were combatting, that has given the medium its artistic power. One only has to trace back to this period and recall the extraordinary pictures of Frederick Evans and Henri Lartigue. More recently critics like Susan Sontag have perceived the differences between photography and painting. She writes in The New York Review of Books:

"Photography proposes a process of imagination and an appeal to those

quite different from that of
painting....." 10

and

"Photography's aims more resemble
those of poetry than painting
which (is often) merely 'retinal,'
whereas modernist poetry's com-
mitment to concreteness and purity
of language parallels photography's
commitment to pure seeing." 11

Inadvertently the photographic pictorialists separated the image from reality. But, their bondage to the sensibilities of other media prevented them from exploring and understanding the inherent characteristics of their own medium.

In Technics and Civilization Louis Mumford stressed an understanding of the "intrinsic esthetic importance of the (medium) in terms of its own peculiar possibilities." 12 He saw every photograph as "essentially a snapshot," attempting to externalize and make permanent a "unique esthetic moment" found in the infinite number of possibilities. Mumford was aware that, when the photograph extracted external phenomena from its context, new spatial relationships and meanings were created. Relationships and meanings that might have "otherwise defied observation" are revealed. The strange and unsettling juxtapositions that occur are often emblematic of a society and environment that we have created but do not understand. The photograph, with its disinterested nature, can alter and adjust our perceptions of an often alien and ephemeral world.

"For photography finally gives the effect of permanence to the transient and ephemeral: photography - and perhaps photography alone - is capable of coping with and adequately presenting the complicated interrelated aspects of our modern environment." 13

At the same time the photograph's abstract quality can simplify reality so that underlying forms and structures are more readily seen. Whether landscape portrait or architectural, the most powerful photographs in the medium's history have been those that, without manipulation, have presented us with a new "knowledge of reality."

Of course the camera is not as scrupulous as it might seem. Photographic images that are in line with our own constructs can be made if one works hard enough. These images will confirm our biases and even desires. On the surface of the print that uses appearances as raw material, a new reality is created. Again Sontag:

"Photographers engage in the usually shady commerce between art and truth; they make many shots to get just the right look on film..... that supports their own notions about how it should appear." 14

Nicholas Nixon, a photographer, has written:

"..... the fictional properties of even the most

utilitarian photograph suggest
 the difficulty of coming to a
 genuine understanding of the
 medium's paradoxes, let alone
 its power..... it hover(s)
 between fact and point of
 view" 15

Even the audience of photography expects their conceptions to be confirmed by the images they view. The poor should look wretched; the rich, ruthless and self-indulgent; and, the new, shoddy; the old stately. When things do not appear as expected the disruption is usually quite visible. This is probably why certain critics responded negatively to Richard Avedon's recent portraits where superstar celebrities and national leaders were often reduced to exhausted and atrophied mortals. Or, when Danny Lyon released his photographs of eighteen months behind Texas prison walls and instead of beatings, rape and other brutalities, we saw mainly isolation, boredom, and atrophy, he was criticized for not including more distressing views.

Photographs are aspects transformed to a semi-permanent plane surface. Something that can be cherished, stored, transported and displayed at will and by different means. They are fragments of things removed from an original context and have great difficulty in explaining anything. Think of the captions that were so necessary in the old picture magazines. Michael Lesy has written that "few photographs are self-sufficient facts," and even fewer are not without "paradox and ambiguity." We shall see in the following section how it is this indeterminate quality, rather than explicitness and completeness, that provides much of the interest of a

successful photograph.

What then, if we no longer completely value the photograph as replica, believe in the photographer as shaman, or trust the image's veracity and meaning, is the purpose of photography? Like fine wine, good fishing and professional baseball it is simply a pleasure. As for all hedonistic acts there is a price to pay. Good, solid photography is demanding in both production and viewing. When reading a complex novel one must be engaged both decisively and discursively at the same time. Whether photographer stalking his subject or audience exploring the visual loot,

"He resembles perhaps most of all the imaginative reader intent on studying and deciphering an elusive text. Like a reader, the photographer is steeped in the book of nature." 16

Through the photographic image the pleasure of sight is manifested and the nature of things, rather than revealed, are shown. Should we ignore the replica and dismiss the enchanting magician? No! I hardly think so. However, their proportionate placement within the scheme of things should be only personally and privately established.

Concerning the Photographs

The photographs that you are about to see were made, for the most part, during the academic year 1976-77. All but two were shot after September of 1975 - the month that I began graduate work at M.I.T. These images express what seems to be, for me, an inexhaustible fascination with the external world, especially that which has been constructed by man. This devotion to those "things" out there in real space is served well by the highly descriptive power of the photographic image. Like a good carpenter the tools and methods that I choose to use are sharp and sound. My technique is traditional - the silver bromide image. Experimentation, as such, occupies the sensibility rather than the process. Edward Weston, whom I greatly admire, believed in maximum simplicity of technique. To this conviction I totally adhere. This is not to be taken as dogma, but simply a personal desire to conduct the business of perceptual exploration out in the field of open space rather than within the confines of laboratory or darkroom.

I love the encounter between myself and the physical world. A photograph is, out of necessity, a collaboration between the two of us. It is this premise that prompted Rudolf Arnheim to write:

".....(in order) to make sense of photographs - look at them as encounters between physical reality and the creative mind of man, not simply as a reflection of that reality." 17

The things that I photograph are often trivial and commonplace and I attempt to make them interesting - as they are for me, because, in most cases, they represent

the modest but very real endeavors and aspirations of their builders. But, this is only one of many layers of consciousness that exist in my work. Often the things photographed are, more than anything, raw material -- as John Szarkowski says, "the pretext for making a picture."

I love the explorative power of the medium and relish in the inclusion of "slowly seen detail." This, along with the strenuous physical commitment, is why I choose to work with a large camera -- usually used with a tripod. Linda Nochlin has stated that "...the realist mode implies enrichment and inclusion." This desire for enrichment, excess, a surplus of facts, I have not yet begun to satisfy. The last group of images in this volume come closer than most but the goal has not yet been attained.

In my thesis proposal I wrote: At this time it is difficult, if not impossible, to say what the photographs will look like. What can be said is that for the most part, they will be of the external world and, like intrepid commuters, will move with ease between the urban and the rural. I firmly believe that man's external manifestations contain a latent content which speaks of the archetype and the mystical. It is with the surface manifestations that photography can exert its own transformative power.

".....the surfaces of things are quite eloquent. While hiding the inside, they also reveal it." 18

If these realistic traits tend to compete with formative urges, I think it only natural. In photography, subject matter usually pushes through no matter how strong the act of formalism. The two do not have to conflict. What is important is the 'right' mixture.

".....good form, far from emasculating the message, is, on the contrary, the only way of making it accessible to the mind." 19

I also like a statement by the sculptor David Von Schlegell who said, when you speak of "formalism, you're speaking of the relationships of objects. I feel a trace going back to pre history of man using objects for magic....."

The pictures that you are about to see, while acknowledging the things photographed, probably tend to deal more with both underlying structures and formalistic possibilities withⁿ the capacity of the medium. Let it not be forgotten that one form is being translated into another and the act requires perception, luck, skill and hard work. It has been said the photography involves, "the luck of the fisherman with the scent of the hunter." John Szarkowski has recently written:

"A photograph of a building is neither a replica nor a model, but the translation of an idea from an architectural to a pictorial form. It is, inevitably, a critical act, recording not only the building itself, but the photographer's understanding of it, and of his own medium's capacity to describe it. Like other varieties of photographs, it is made, not born." 20

Finally, in my photographs I often attempt both ambiguity and indeterminateness - not as easily accomplished as one would think. Gaston Bachelard has written that, "images that become too clear become generalities

and for that reason block the imagination.²¹ No longer am I seeking completeness and definiteness. I trust and even demand that the audience bring with them something to the image. They should extend their own imaginations beyond the frame (which is provisional) and allow this undefined territory to become an integral part of the image, thus evoking even more than the photographer's gift. In recent work I am hoping to attain a random and non-hierarchical organization that reflects a similar condition of and within the things I photograph. Rather than forcing a pictorial composition it is indefiniteness and suggestion that I cultivate. Fortunately, the medium has an affinity both for the indeterminate and multiple meanings.²² -- to resist this intrinsic quality is to beg defeat. These ideas are akin to other media such as field painting and some architecture. Paul Kennon, a Los Angeles architect, was recently quoted, "(I) am concerned about a building as a changing, growing process rather than as an object..... a positive attitude toward indeterminacy is part of our new reality."²³

For me reality is infinitely interesting and ever changing. It provides the substance with which I operate. Both as territory for exploration and friendly opponent in a never ending bout of visual wrestling, it serves well my chosen medium. What I am attempting to say is nowhere better stated than this passage by James Agee in the classic Let Us Now Praise Famous Men:

".....the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no

symphony can and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

"This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time....." 24

The Photographs

The following are contact prints and do not equal the exhibited enlargements in tonal balance and luminosity. They should be viewed as illustrations, not as the object itself. The sizes (image, height preceding width) unless otherwise noted are 6" x 7³/₄".









































































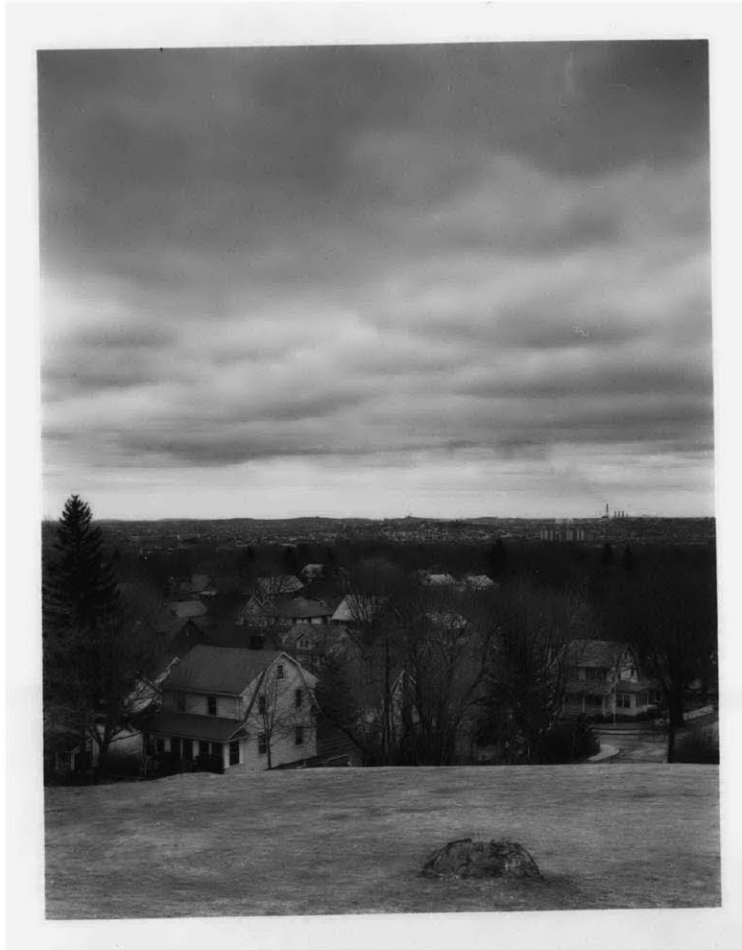




61.













Notes

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