

The Photographer's Lust: A Conversation with Neal Rantoul

Neal Rantoul is having a celebratory moment. His retrospective in Boston's Panopticon Gallery was received with appreciative, even grateful reviews. Mark Feeney, The Boston Globe's Pulitzer Prize winning art critic wrote, "[Rantoul's] photographs express a sense of democratic nobility." The Boston Phoenix, Art New England, and others followed suit. Such kudos are welcome at any time, but particularly after more than 30 years as a photographer.

The Panopticon Gallery is located, flow-through, in the halls of the meticulously groomed Hotel Commonwealth. Aside from the superior quality of the restaurant, there's more a sense of being in a Museum than a hotel or gallery. Elegant and serious, it suits Neal's deceptively spare black and white landscapes well. Many of the images are from his recent first monograph, "American Series," which visits morsels of rural Utah, California, Washington state, Georgia, Massachusetts, Wyoming, and Maine. Many are of the natural world, or the human-made world after it's been abandoned.

Neal himself can also appear serious, perhaps from his many years as an educator, but an impish grin that appears to cross his face involuntarily suggests he works hard to maintain his professorial bearing. Tall, bald, and quietly handsome at 64, he's headed the Photography Program at Northeastern University since 1981. He also taught "across the river" (at Harvard) for over a decade. And, in quiet parallel with a teaching career, he's made pictures, many of them: 45 series of between 8 and 36 images, selected from circa fifty times that number.

I first met Neal several years ago at The New England Portfolio Review, a regional forum where "emerging" photographers have the opportunity to show their work to a variety of chieftains: curators, gallery owners, and established photographers. Advice and "exposure"—no pun intended—are among the offerings.

Neal and I have been having an ongoing discussion about photographers' motivation; the drive, and passion, indeed the lust. He concedes that even after all these years, he's never quite so happy as when out roaming, often far and wide, with a camera. What experience, or experiential process persuades one to ignore hunger, fatigue and even darkness, returning home only when completely out of film (then) or memory card space (now)?

Robert Adams' 1998 monograph, "Why People Take Pictures" sounds like the right subject. Robert Adams should not be mistaken for his more famous, but unrelated namesake, Ansel. Ironically, it's Robert who's had the most profound influence on the photographic aesthetic of the last quarter-plus century. Robert Adams was a central figure in New Topographics, a 1975 exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, subtitled, Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape. His painfully dreary portraits of subdivision tract housing in Colorado Springs and elsewhere became a quiet arbiter of cultural anomie, species imperialism, and destruction of the natural world(!). Neal's

Panopticon show is not without debt to Adams, although feels more personally than socially inspired.

Adams decries biographers who gossip about their eminent subjects while neglecting their work, but “Why People Take Pictures” doesn’t answer the question from an interior, or psychological perspective. A quick look at photoquotes.com provides a more promising window. Julia Margaret Cameron, the great Victorian portrait photographer wrote, “From the first moment, I handled my lens with a tender ardour.” {Add} for Neal, photography is not just a passion, but one that fuels “everything”.

Neal confesses he wasn’t much of a student to start with. In fact, after an undistinguished prep school career, he flunked out of The University of Denver in his Junior year. This may have had something to do with success as the social chair of his fraternity. He’d felt inspired by a design course but, although he came from an artistic family, “Art was not an option.” His mother was a painter, and his two older sisters were artists as well. One had gone to “Riz-dee”, the affectionate acronym for The Rhode Island School of Design, and his brother-in-law taught there.

His father, however, was a businessman, with a Harvard B-School pedigree and, as Neal describes, an awkward relationship with his son. Vocationally, Neal was expected to fall along the family’s gender divide. But, having left college he came home, and occupied himself through the transition with a year of courses at The Silvermine College of Art, (now Silvermine Guild of Artists), in New Canaan, Ct. He was thrilled. It was as if a switch had been flipped. “My motivation changed entirely in the visual arts. I found myself.” He later transferred to RISD, where in turn he received both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Most curiously, Neal’s father had also arrived at RISD, as its president. Neal’s rather casual about what might be a potent Oedipal drama. He says, simply, “I shook his hand at graduation, twice.”

At RISD, Neal met Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. Callahan had started the department in 1961, and both became photographer’s photographers to several generations. Neal identified with “Harry” as someone, he believes, also came to photography feeling, “I finally found something I could do”. Siskind was “A sweetheart”. Neal had the opportunity to study briefly with Frederick Sommer as well, a man as unusual as his own surrealist imagery, which included elegantly staged chicken viscera.

Initially, Neal had studied painting, and gotten some attention for work in an abstract expressionist vein. He describes working on large canvases in a friend’s barn, and carting them off in a rented bread truck to gallery on Boston’s Newbury Street. He seems to attribute the fact they were then hung, and sold, to a masterful bit of adolescent bluff.

His heart, though, was in photography. He found it challenging. Unlike a painting, “I couldn’t make it the way I wanted”. Instead, Neal became interested in “what the world becomes as a picture”. Here he appears to subscribe to some version of street photographer Gary Winogrand’s widely quoted comment, “I photograph to see what the world looks like in photographs.” I find this statement tautological, and even nonsensical, but rendered more coherent by Neal’s abstract expressionist perspective. Abstract expressionism uses non-representational means to represent, for example, the world. Neal’s remarkable images of

the wheat fields around Pullman Washington—"The Palouse"—many of them aerials, are a unique alloy of pure abstraction and the world.

Is photography art? is an entirely dead question, not the least of which because Christie's and Sotheby's says so. But, photography has always had an uneasy, poor step-child relationship with painting and the other arts. In contrast though, I'm thinking of a recent exchange with a woman in a gallery where both paintings and photographs hung. As we studied the walls, I lamented aloud that most of the patrons were more interested in the paintings. "Oh no," she surprised me, "I'm much more interested in photography. I don't care what's in someone's imagination—said as if a dirty word—I want to see the world." ...much to contemplate here.

Pictorialism, the turn of the (last) century photographic style promoted by Alfred Steiglitz and his "Photo Secessionists", prized the rendering of painterly photographs. They sought to elevate the status of photography to something nearer that of painting. A more crucial impetus was George Eastman's introduction of the first mass produced Kodak camera in 1888: "You press the button, we do the rest." Pictorialists wanted to distinguish themselves from the throngs of others taking snapshots.

Interestingly enough, the digital revolution has brought a second wave of professional photographers trying to distinguish themselves from imaginative 4th graders with point-and-shoots, and otherwise transcend the new blows to rarity. In many au courant exhibitions, mixed media, installation, "alternative process", and video reign, as well as ever mushrooming digital wizardry.

Pictorialism was supplanted by so-called "straight photography", the clear, sharp images of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Imogene Cunningham. It's not accidental this familiar camp gained momentum amidst the expansive, natural beauty of the West coast, in counterpoint to Steiglitz's Manhattan gallery.

Internal tensions are hardly new in photography's 150 year, barely adolescent history: highbrow vs. lowbrow; fine art vs. documentary; found vs. staged; black and white vs. color; imagistic vs. conceptual; film vs. digital etc. What's clear, however, is that all these definitions and boundaries have been irreversibly thrust into imaginative post-modern disarray. Take, as a small example, Nigerian born, contemporary British photographer Simon Norfolk. Norfolk has documented landscapes of war and genocide—most poignantly that of Afghanistan's 30 year siege—with the sensibility of a Hudson River School painter. It's hard not to think of a "a new pictorialism."

Neal joined the digital revolution as a pioneer, researching the new-fangled approach as early as 1991, and making inkjet prints by 1996. It seemed a practical tack, as well as prescient. Although an acute observer of the changing scene, including of mixed blessing short-cuts in his own habits, he's nonplussed by the outcome. His passion for taking photographs, and the images themselves, are fundamentally independent of technology. He has no reservations about exhibiting film and digital capture, and/or darkroom and digital prints side by side.

If Neal had expected an orderly succession of photographic ascendancy from Callahan and Siskind to his generation, he hadn't anticipated a digitally enhanced post-

modern shakedown. Nor might he have predicted the dismantling of cultural authoritarianism in general. In the poetry world, for example, the baton practically passed, willy-nilly, from T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden to hundreds of MFA students. Photographic genealogy underwent a similar populace explosion. In both fields, however, the blooms of progeny have helped to keep their elders from starving; not a bad thing.

Relatedly, the nearly 30 year curatorial sovereignty (1962-1991) of John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art would simply not be possible today. No single hand could forge the photographic canon as Szarkowski was able to do by exalting the work of Gary Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and William Eggleston.

In the time following his years at RISD, Neal exhibited his work in a variety of venues and, most importantly, consolidating a core identity as a photographer. He observes, “Photography became this thing that I am; a combination of gut, heart, need, and intuition.”

At the same time, he began his career as a teacher. Twice married in his youth, a father, and a grandfather, Neal also allows that he once nursed a litter of abandoned kittens with an eyedropper until they were old enough to be adopted. Never the less, he claims he’s not a born teacher. “I work at it,” he says emphatically. But, it’s not hard to imagine each student receiving patient didactic nurturance, through an eyedropper if need be. He also brings the senior majors to a family home on Martha’s Vineyard each year, surely a fairytale perk for some. His students, he notes, always endeavor to get him drunk on these fieldtrips, a wile he steadfastly resists.

In the late 70’s Neal felt a need to organize, and “contain” his work because, “it was all over the place”. He contrived to select and arrange images in a sequence—“like a symphony”—the exact number intrinsic to the particular work”. “I found a way to photograph that allows me to connect pictures to pictures, forming a narrative...I became interested in the ability to speak more completely about a place, a frame of mind, light, or the relationship between things.” Once a series is assembled, often over many years, and often with the input of others to hone in on the keepers, “it’s pretty fixed”. He doesn’t much like going back to old work.

The idea of a photographic series, doesn’t seem particularly novel today. Coherent bodies of work are de rigueur, although, with some pretention, a series is now a project. More than a collection or simple typology, a series becomes a visual language. Although Neal speaks of forming a narrative, it may not be a linear one, but more a “narrative matrix”, with evolving stylistic properties.

The poet Adrienne Rich writes, “What does it mean to be contemporary?” A complex question, and at the very least, a moving target. What teenagers at the mall are wearing is one answer—always good to check in with them.

With photographs of the Great Depression, Walker Evans metamorphosed the vernacular to fine art. Robert Frank—whom Susan Sontag saw as devil to Walker Evans’ angel—in his 1958 monograph “The Americans” precipitated a paradigm shift from beautiful to ugly. Robert Adams brought that paradigm to an unfortunately willing landscape. Wary of formulas, a contemporary project never the less often contains

something old, something new...some things sexy, reverent, ironic and decadent. A stricken or dead animal (with a nod to Sommer's chickens) helps too.

Neal's series are subtle in their articulation. Although neither constructed nor conceptual, they're "about something", a "cohesion", which may be as ephemeral as a quality of light. He makes a point of saying he really can't answer a concrete question like, What are you making? And, he's relatively uninterested in academic criticism—"Let them say what they like"—because the interior experience is paramount. He views himself as at the interface between the world and the photograph, "internally motivated, and externally influenced". He notes that a younger generation of curators have shifted attention from the historical context of photographs, and photography as an intellectual pursuit, to photography as about peoples lives.

Neal's not unwilling to suggest there's an addictive or obsessive-compulsive dimension to his taking photographs, complete with a withdrawal syndrome. "If I haven't used the camera for a while, I don't feel right, there's a hole." Taking photographs allows, at least in those moments, "not worrying about anything". A colleague of Neal's teased affectionately, "Neal needs to stop taking photographs!"

One can't help but think of Winogrand, who died leaving some 300,000 unedited images, and 2,500 rolls of undeveloped film. Vivian Maier, Chicago's newly discovered virtuoso street photographer, apparently blindly cached, as well as sequestered her oeuvre. Clearly, the process of taking photographs may be cherished beyond the product.

When out with a camera, Neal feels he's "looking for something," and that this something—an emotional something—is pre-scripted; "there, but unrevealed". His attachment to landscape as a subject is less literally an attachment to place, than to the emotion with which it comes to be imbued. "People feel connected to landscape at that level. The landscape is exterior, but the camera is telling what's going on inside." He gives as an example his Oaksdale, Washington series—"about openness, closure and ambiguity"—which he considers his most important work. Traveling alone, and having awakened from a roadside nap, he began to photograph a small cemetery and a spate of trees, which he captured in an overlapping sequence. More than the gravestones, the last tree, a dead one, became a metaphor for his best friend dying of leukemia. Neal hadn't consciously recognized the association until tears were streaming down his face.

Perhaps profound emotion can only be expressed metaphorically, or that all emotion is ultimately not only individual, but abstract. Here visual metaphor has an immediate and primal advantage over verbal language. Think of William Wordsworth's line, "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."; tears, much less words. It's no accident that image and imagine are from the same Latin root.

Neal's opuses also include more macabre series, from the ridiculous to the sublime: images of dioramas found across the country in Cabellas stores, and eerily beautiful ones of anatomical specimens from Philadelphia's Mutter Museum, and the Lazzaro Spallanzani Collection in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Neal's indifference to critical theory notwithstanding, the question of where photography criticism is today is not easily answered. Uber-intellectual writers on the

subject, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, and Walter Benjamin are not quite the shadows in Plato's Cave they were. When I asked Neal what to read, he muttered something about it all being "in the blogs". A recent graduate-now faculty member of the MFA army referred me to a book published by the Aperture Foundation. Perhaps wryly entitled, "Words Without Pictures" is a compilation of hip, egg-heady essays, discussions, and panels substantially from the internet. Printed in many fonts—there are 94 contributors—it's democratically excellent all around.

What does it mean to be contemporary? Clever, we hope, but not endlessly so. During a recent visit, Neal and I stopped into a gallery together. Viewing images by one of the local photographers, he pronounced the work, sincere. I cringed; damned with faint praise being far worse than just plain damned. But, Neal himself was sincere. He respected the work. He was, in effect, saying something about irony having gotten out of control in the contemporary scene. More importantly, he was saying something about authenticity, a quality less and less easily defined as the photographic frontier becomes more and more constructed, manipulated, and conceptual.

Will Neal's photographs endure? For that matter, will anyone's, in the vast oceans of imagery? Moreover, is a photograph meant to endure as more than a "visual tweet", much less become iconic?

When Neal turned 60, a friend and colleague asked if he thought his best work was already "in the portfolio". Startled by the question, which was without malice, he took it as a challenge, and has been particularly prolific since.

Last year, in rehearsal for retirement from Northeastern, he embarked on a travel sabbatical to locales familiar, and new: Italy, Utah, Texas, as well as closer to home. It's certainly fair to say some of his lust has always been wanderlust. He prefers to travel alone, although his journeys are peppered with visits to family, friends, former students, and colleagues. The result was a salubrious new book entitled, "A Year".

Some of Neal's attention is necessarily absorbed by the recognition his older work is currently receiving. He doesn't deny enjoying the privileges conferred by seniority—including comfortable regard as an authority. But, his primary focus—pun intended—remains held by an ever mysterious internal lens.

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