

Profile

Words:

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Arthur S. Aubry: A Third Thing

The successful element in abstract art that artists normally find difficult to talk about doesn't elude photographer Arthur S. Aubry. Though some of his photographs are non-representational, others are so "concrete" as to be considered surreal.

"That's basically what I look for when I'm shooting—a perfectly normal object transforming into something else entirely, based purely on how it is framed, lit and located," he says. "Those three things seldom all line up exactly right, so it's a thrill when they do. There's a lot of waiting, a lot of looking at things over and over, going back to things at different times of day or [different] seasons, and there's a lot of serendipity."

One gets the sense that he must have seen the final composition in some of his more abstract photographs—or at least had an idea. Aubry finds a certain intrinsic logic, or visual correctness, in his subject matter. Though he doesn't set out searching for specific images, he does have what reporters refer to as a "beat." This gives him the advantage of being able to watch subjects across a timeline. He has a series of routes that he refers to as "trap lines" that he returns to repeatedly. As things change through the effects of time and the elements, the opportunities to make pictures in those places changes.

Aubry either stumbles across his subjects or stalks them, often waiting years for the components to line up right. In getting "Revisitation" to work, for example, he

tracked the subject—an element of the Tacoma Water District infrastructure—until the image's background would comply, lending the picture an interloper quality of the alien kind. "The picture never worked [previously] because of the shrub behind it," he says. "I had to wait for five years for the shrub to get big enough to make the picture work. There's enough mass there that it becomes a sort of backdrop."

A massive railroad yard called Big Pasco in East Washington provides Aubry with much of his visual fodder. He shoots on film with a Hasselblad and a 60mm lens and manipulates nothing, adhering to the purist's credo of capturing an image intact. He also uses the slowest color material available for saturation, which for a number of years was Kodak's Ektar 25 film before the film was discontinued, and a polarizer filter.

"I like the fact that in bright light with a slow film, you get this strange little effect where, when you are generally shooting at a quarter of a second or half a second in bright sunlight, you get this teeny little bit of motion blur," said Aubry. "I just think that's kind of interesting."

It can be difficult sometimes to determine what one is actually looking at in some of Aubry's work, such as "Extension Booms @ Port of Benton County." Obscuring horizon and perspective, generally, is his modus operandi in his more abstract work, leaving the image open to interpretation. Did he see the "silhouette in snow" in "Extension Booms?" Maybe. Maybe not.

"It kind of creates a question," he says. "That removal of reference is a photograph past simply representing something. A picture works for me if that information isn't there. It's changing it into something else, and that

transformation is really kind of interesting. It becomes a third thing.” surprised to have captured something so ethereal out of an industrial object. But then, he is often surprised by the objects and settings he encounters.

“It’s just a vent, but because of the way it was lit, it becomes this utterly baffling thing. That image works because you can see the ground, which is unusual. I wasn’t expecting that at all. Actually, I thought I was done at that site on that day. But what often happens is that I’ll be looking at something, and I’ll just turn around and look behind me, and it’s suddenly, ‘Oh, there it is.’”

Getting the organic and watery lushness in “Processed Propeller” did not come as easily, as Aubry had to “fight” with the image. The sun was just setting. The light was perfect and the angle of the light was perfect. There was only one little spot that the camera could go to lose the sense of scale. Aubry says the picture works better for him if the horizon line is lost. When people look at his pictures, they often try to find out what, exactly, they are looking at, and where the photographer was situated in relationship to the subject matter.

Other compositions are achieved with less difficulty. As with most forms of art, the unexpected, given the right circumstances, can lead to the most gratifying results. While travelling along one of his trap lines, Aubry came across a pod of scrapped-out tanks, and the result was the beautiful and subatomic Galaxal #1. Each tank was on its side, and Aubry could peer in through the open access ports. This image was the result of a long exposure peering into the bottom of the tank, lit by the daylight streaming in around the camera.

Aubry’s origin story concerning his interest in photography fittingly has to do with something mechanical. While at an air show, his father took a photo of a Sopwith Camel cockpit. Two weeks later Aubry was looking at that picture and found the cockpit even more interesting rendered photographically than it had been in person. That visual translation amazed and fascinated him, and by the time he was 15, he had a camera of his own.

His scientific background may (or may not, according to Aubry) influence his work. But

Similarly, in discovering the “portal” aspect in “Negative Solid,” Aubry said he was if it is, it’s not conscious. His BA—ironically or not—is in Environmental Science. Nonetheless, he is being unwillingly pushed to print digitally, a subject that looms. Aubry’s take on the future of photography is both complex and simple in that he might soon have no choice, but the move to digital printing could change how he makes art. He said he is coming to terms with the “massive changes” that have occurred within the technology.

“There are too many choices,” he says. “Where do you stop? I find the output of most of these things way too intense or overdone. Everything is so mutable that it’s difficult to find a definite spot that is, quote unquote, correct. Part of what I like about traditional photography is that it’s simple. Some photography is like lithography in that it’s either right or wrong. I don’t want to do whatever I want, because all these things are actually there.”

Aubry believes the art of traditional photography, which “at its heart” is black and white, is in the process of being forever eclipsed. “There is a craft to it I really have come to respect, which is being lost, rapidly. And that’s too bad, because once the power goes off and the batteries stop being made, people just won’t have the option to do it the old way. And frankly, I do not have full confidence that the massive infrastructure required to support computerized image creation is something I can count on, paranoid as that may sound.”

No matter how he makes prints, in the darkroom or in a digital environment, Arthur S. Aubry has chosen a medium of self-expression that’s perfectly suited to his temperament.

“Photography has always seemed to me a remarkable way to interpret my world, an overlay on reality that allows me to prioritize. I am striving to make pictures I do not need to explain; I want them to be good enough that they don’t need me.”

With his usual self-effacement, Aubry omits mention of the qualities that contribute to his pictures’ expressive independence: serendipity and skill, the twin arrows in his quiver.