

Thoughts on the curating the "TPS 15" National Competition

There are few tasks as bittersweet as curating an exhibition such as TPS 15. There were a tremendous number (2,596) of superb images from which to select for inclusion matched with the equally impossible requirement to limit the final selections to only a few images. A curator has many different paths to choose when approaching this task, especially when there isn't a defined theme for the show except for the history of carefully considered work in previous TPS national competitions. I wasn't given any guidelines, asked only to look at all of the submissions and pick what I felt was the strongest work submitted, and to then curate an exhibition and catalog that featured that work. How I chose the work, the amount of work allotted for each photographer, and the media was all up to me. To paraphrase Janis Joplin & Kris Kristofferson, freedom isn't all it's cracked up to be.

The work was submitted in both digital form and slides – six trays' worth. There was no information provided about the folks who submitted, no lists of their prior exhibitions or credentials, nothing except the work. My only hard and fast limitation was that the TPS catalog had a strict set number of pages, and only a portion of those pages was to be printed in color. If anyone reading this would like to pony up to the gate and help fund a larger full-color catalog in the future, I'm sure that the TPS would welcome it! The work certainly deserves the effort. So, from 2,596 images I had to narrow it down to approximately 60 images. I could have opted to highlight 10 photographers with 6 images each, or 20 photographers with 3 images each, or some mix. Instead I choose a single image from each photographer, which allowed me to create a much more diverse exhibition and be as inclusive as possible of a wide variety of work and modalities. However, as I will explain later, this had its own consequences.

A few threads emerged in the images. The first thing I noticed is that the work came from around the globe, with many images offering a rather (and I'm not trying to be glib here) twisted view of the world. Even the most conservative photography seemed extraordinarily personal in nature. A combination of travelogue, surrealism, conceptualism, documentary, and project-oriented work imbued the vast majority of submissions. Many of the works seemed drawn from editorial assignments, while others were obviously purely fine-art in nature. The other theme that ran throughout the work was the unfinished narrative. Surprisingly, given the extreme political and cultural polarization in our country (and the world) at the moment, there was virtually no work of an overt political nature.

I should note that I've never been at ease with a precise explanation nor held a consistent definition of what exactly fine art photography is, except that, like the Supreme Court once said of other more primal imagery, I'd like to think that I know it when I see it. But, the seamless transition of work that begins in one genre and moves through other to another mode of acceptance complicates this notion. When Dorothea Lange created

“Migrant Mother” in 1936, fine-art photographic aesthetic concerns were far from foremost in her mind. What mattered to her then, and to many photographers now, was the use of photography to help save some little corner of the world and a few of its inhabitants. However, just as that particular image migrated from strict photojournalism to the realm of fine art photography, now any lines between the various definitions of photography are blurred, if not invisible. This was very apparent in the work submitted for TPS 15, with impassioned documentary work colliding with tableaux work overflowing with color, intersected by a significant amount of work that appeared to be alternative process, with clear evidence of, and love for the handwork that is often the unpredictable and beloved hallmark of alternative process photography. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and for every promise of the latest generation of “photo realistic” printers or cameras from the XYZ (We Own the Code!) digital photo company, there is the sensuousness and mystery of the opposite, that of making it from scratch. Then comes the digital component, which manifests itself as either a textbook example of Photoshop 101 with the latest filters on parade, or invisibly contained, since, with digital output having taken over as the overwhelming choice for final prints, it’s often unclear (at least to me viewing this work) what is digital and what isn’t, although some of the digital work deftly wove stories of fantasy and longing into singular images of invented realities, that film couldn’t quite match. Remember that I received only the digital files or copy slides to go from, so I wasn’t even sure of the medium much of the time. The photo historian in me cringes at the thought of so little provenance, but the curator part just loves the idea of looking at work bereft of clues and explanations. Just the facts, Ma’am!

In trying to make sense of this work I made some difficult decisions. The first was that with so much strong work and a finite amount of catalog and exhibition space, as much as I wanted to, I wasn’t going to choose for the catalog more than one example of a single photographer’s work. Thus, some work that worked best in serial form had to then work in a single selection. This decision was amongst the most painful, because my own proclivity isn’t to one-shot wonders, but to fully developed bodies of work that reveal the range of both commitment and talent to the project.

The second choice was to be absolutely aware of the fact that the selected image needed to stand completely on its own, since it wouldn’t have the support of other sustaining images. Consequently, many images that worked in serial form didn’t work as well in singular form.

The third choice was to aim for an overriding aesthetic for the exhibition and catalog, and after looking at the almost 2,600 images a multitude of times, I attempted to create an exhibition that celebrated the incredible diversity of images, yet was coherent in its attention to the passionate observation of the authors of the work and a certain emotional stance.

In the beginning of this statement, I used the word “bittersweet,” because I had no choice but to eliminate some incredibly strong work. I joked with Clarke that after this experience, I had three wishes. The first was for a larger catalog, and the second was for a second exhibition so that more of the work could be exhibited and given its due. Third was a good bottle (or two...) of bourbon to help ease the angst the process invoked. Making the final selection was a simultaneously painful and joyous experience, and I was keenly aware that much of the contemporary creative work we take for granted in our lives - for example artists and musicians such as Erik Satie, the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Robert Frank, and Jackson Pollock, to name only a tiny few - were all rejected by the academy or by so-called “experts” at some time or another, and try as I might, I’ve no doubt that I have made the same mistake in judgment. So, if your work wasn’t included in the final selection, just remember how much other important work didn’t fit precisely into one exhibition, grant, or publishing event, and yet went on to move and influence the medium. I have a firm belief that great work transcends individual bumps into the road, be they political, curatorial, personality, folks sitting on grant boards, or what is or is not in fashion.

The work chosen represents many of the themes of contemporary photographic practice. The work of Tom Chambers combines the ability of digital imaging to create seamless transitions between reality and the mythic response and in doing so, reveals a fervent imagination at work, in which playfulness seems as valued as is clarity. The same ability of digital imaging to create images not seen was playfully and skillfully ensconced in Joseph Labate’s creations. The same joy is present in Paul Weiner’s interior image created by painting with light, an old technique, but deftly used here to create an alternate household reality. Byron Baruchi’s image of a bicycle, seemingly at one in nature, combines the distressed values of an alternative process print, with the ironic combination of a contemporary bicycle with a lush and out-of-control desert landscape. Michael Gonzales’ documentary images of boxing are drawn from the history of boxing as a way out of poverty, yet there is something special about them that make them fresh and compelling and of the present. Jon Edward’s enigmatic images of rural life both speak to the personal narrative, as well as a documentary of a life that is quickly vanishing. Kenny Braun’s image of a woman descending a grand Parisian staircase captured the fluid elegance of a time gone by, an image framed by the natural formality of the space and belying the decade (recent) during which it was made. Judith Faust’s color photo of an undefined room, with the cool blue of a pool table contrasting with the almost matched set of red recliners, framed by photos and awards.

At a time when film has been declared dead, Gilles Perrin’s serial Polaroid images from Africa provide a toned and sublimated black-and-white context, placing the subjects very much in the present, even if they seem misplaced from another century. George Obremski’s image of Greece also seems from another era, yet is entirely within our realm of belief. Each of Siri Kaur’s lush color portraits seemed to be complete unfinished narratives, as were Julia Fullerton Batten’s rich, surreal, yet unexpectedly familiar color

tableaus. Frank Schramm's series of what seemed to be television news reporters in moments of personal crisis or doubt blurred the line of what happens when the document of the documentary transcends its origins to a new level of sincere confusion. Their quiet conceptual conceit, is made believable by our cumulative lack of trust in the media. Taking stock of the everyday and celebrating it as in Rachel Cox's photo of roller skates at the skating rink, is something we have all seen, but bypassed, but lucky for us, she didn't ignore, bringing back for me at any rate, an instant connection of days and nights spent racing around those hardwood floors. Shigeki Yoshida's film noir streetscape, mirroring the work of the great Ray Metzker, compacted the street into a chiascuro scene, a graphic map of line, form and texture.

One of my favorite surprises was the wealth of portrait work, including Colin Blakely's black-and-white image of a man batting solo in an open field, surrounded by houses, but with no one there to either catch or pitch a ball; and Keith Sharp's image of a normal table, chair, lamp, and mural forcing the viewer to question if it's a conceptual work, or a reflection of how the distinctions between reality and kitsch are blurred. The use of color for documentary work in Rick Remniz's photographs of a young boy has at once a sense of respect for the past and future, and yet is lyrically grounded in an absolute place and time. In Shen Wei's portraits, emotions splay off the page, with a sense of inner melancholy as deep as any that I've seen, a theme amplified by Chris Silano's portraits of hesitancy. Heather McClintock's horrifying images from Uganda of victims of abuse are profoundly touching and informed by the classic documentary impulse to expose both the horror of inhumanity and the hope that is the hallmark of the documentary ethos. On a warmer front, Todd Stewart's photos of seemingly angelic children lost in their own thoughts almost made me believe that children were truly angelic, a vision somewhat tempered by my experience with my own two boys. Susan Bank's image of a youth standing, holding onto a pool cue, felt like a documentary still about another time period, one that wasn't clearly defined, yet somehow familiar, partly I'm sure because Bruce Davidson's image is so clearly in our consciousness. Bruce West's portrait of Reverend H.D. Dennis on his front porch, the color's intensity matched only by the good Reverend's faith, while Polly Chandler's image invoked a spiritually framed scene, whose passion is sublimated into the unknown. Jessie I. Eisner-Kleye created one the most unsettling yet one of the most intimate images submitted. Her image of a soiled hand grasping a woman's pale white arm, was almost impossible to explain, yet to me exemplified the intensely personal relationships that predicated much of the work.

There are images of travel, not as mere travelogue, but the essence of traveling. There are images of childhood rituals, such as F.W. Pate's rambunctious narrative of a dice game at play, little kid Soprano's in the making. The classic landscape was beautifully revealed in a stroke that Minor White would have loved in Cole Thompson's mist-enshrouded farm, complete with a moon floating overhead, or Monica Denevan's iconographic image of a young man against the sea, an image as classic and beautiful as any I have seen. Colleen Meacham's lush, almost humid landscape was missing the center, but the romantic sense

of place seemed to be the actual center, echoed by Shannon Welles' surreal and atmospheric village hut, or the swirling lushness of Paul Rose's sunburst of warmth and nature with dizzying energy. I'm not sure if Alison Hunter's image of a giraffe is more about conceptual conceits or a portrait of a giraffe, but either way, the image drew many conflicting thoughts on the "preservation" of any species, event, or place through something as abstract as a photograph, especially since the transformation of life into an design object is a fetish worth noting. Tony De Bone's image of a woman framed by almost blown-out roots and branches had much the same effect, invoking an almost cinematic reference to a place, instead of the place itself. A chilling sense of place seemed the subject of Roberto Guerra's multilayered image of some unknown Eastern European country, with a shadow cutting through the image, in search of something, but of which we have no idea, with the uniformed portrait of Big Brother looming above. A precise layering of plastic, stainless steel, and glass form the background for Tim Nurczyk's solitary image of the commute and travel that eats up so much of our lives. Once again, I wasn't sure if this seemingly banal image was of travel, commuting, or desperation.

Michael Matsil, Chris Dunker, and Chuck Avery all explored the idea of the landscape under revision, both beautiful and frightening in the destruction revealed, yet somehow accepting with a sigh of resignation. Images that explore the documentary form, either as the energized cowboy on the ranch from Susan Hayre Thelwell, Steacy Will's evidence of catastrophe in the residue of Hurricane Katrina, John A. Stewart's lyrical portrait of a young boy on the verge of manhood, Ellie Brown's empathy for the terror and pleasure of that horrible test of our high school years - preparing for the prom, or the ravishing loneliness of Nadine Rovner's image of a woman preparing for some event outside the frame, hopefully romantic. Jamie Karutz and Maria Van Arsdale both approached the flower but with very different results, Van Arsdale's singular image was heroic in its respect for the flower, while Karutz's multiple image panel seemed as obsessed with beauty as for transitions. Erika Lippman took an alternate view, preferring to consider a lit garage at night as a form of suburban theater, a living diorama that Daguerre would have been hard-pressed to compete with for his own Diorama in Paris. Keiko Hiromi explored the urban milieu with closely seen, street theater images from a bystanders view, where something as simple as blowing up a balloon is suddenly a moment worth reconsidering.

Much of the work seems obsessed with rituals, from Jeremy Green's lovingly and sculptured dead bird, Robert Bradshaw's enigmatic bird on a chair, or Cece Skeith's image of that solitary moment where we look from bed to the clock, not sure what the connection is, or what lies ahead. Joe Fammartino's documentation of a barber shop brings to life the still primal experience of letting someone else make decisions about our look, style, and public presentation, all the while its primary concern seems to be dedicated to preserving the space and activity for the record, for all time to remember. Gray Hawn's image of what seemed like a temple, with a figure off in the mist, also invoked the spiritual, but as a relic of a long gone age. I wasn't sure if Darwin Harrison's

neon-lit church was a spiritual statement or a modernist reduction of only the essentials of modern design and religion. Clean, precise, and theatrically lit against a jet-black background.

The ritual present in something entirely handmade or using alternative processes such as Laura Bennett's image of a chair, or Lola Huitt's embrace of a nest with eggs, whose liquid artifact of wet-collodion timelessness seems comforting in this time of binary encoding, and reflects the need to connect, not only on an art-driven aesthetic level but also as humanity reaching out to one another, as evidenced by Jill Enfield's work with the wet-collodion process, in which she deftly erases the boundaries of time. Robb Siverson's photo of a road barrier asked me to ponder if the image was a mistake, chemicals gone bad and out of control, or a commentary on the nature of chemistry based photography itself, a pun of digital proportions. Tina Maas choose to have different elements colliding for her image that was at once about fashion and alternative process, and even looked as if the portrait was of someone underwater, yet together created a quiet, elegant dreamlike image with no deliberate context. I had no idea what to make of Justin Gillispie's image of an outstretched hand, possibly from a mannequin, with what looked like a bit of chalk into the palm, but I'm sure that the image was channeling Ralph Eugene Meatyard's vision of everyday life.

The definition of a ritual wasn't always so clear, but Mark Ray's quiet, solitary image of a shopping cart abandoned (we think) at night, Matt Nighswander's couple on a bridge, lost in some crystalline moment, contrasted with Gina Dabrowski's image of impersonal or personal moments -- getting a mammogram, as lifesaving a ritual as one can imagine, with as little imaginable romance. The heroism of ritual was present in Teresa Ollila's photographs of children battling disease, with wry commentary on the need to make the outrageously invasive somehow regular, because without that conceit, who knows if the strength to fight would exist. Caleb Charland's personal ritual seemed to be making crazy light inventions only for the chance to be captured photographically, yet like most rituals, left more unanswered, than answered. The weirdness of Colleen Mullins' traipses into the world of the ultra-rich wasting their lives on cruise ship lines seemed summed up by the collision of drinks, ties, and privilege. I might be stretching it a bit, but Jeonghyun Lee's poetically composed image of a spool of thread struck me as ritualistic, as did Robert Vizzini's distressed nightscapes, or John Langmore's romantically lit male dominated meal, and Greg Davis's close-up of hands from a visit to India, hands ablaze with the colors of that man's own rituals, matched by some other unknown ritual by Carole Devillers, of a dance, or exercise at sunset, a image that made feel guilty I wasn't on the front lawn practicing Tai Chi, or working on my Zen. Meg Escude's fluorescent portrait of circus performers also spoke of travel, but added the collision of western culture and age-old symbols of theater. How else to explain the basketball shoes, fishnet stockings, and clothing inspired by ancient rituals?

I could write forever on how many stories and emotions the submitted work provoked, and I'd still leave out work that deserves to be talked about, discussed, and exhibited. I've probably made a ton of mistakes in the confessional above; not really knowing the "back-story" on the images, I've imagined their meaning and circumstances, a task made all the more difficult with no original images to rely on, only digital file versions, or slides. When I started writing, I thought that I'd only discuss the award winners, but choosing those few works out of 2,596 was even more difficult than one can imagine, so I started writing about all the works accepted, and simply couldn't stop, which I hope you won't hold against me. My prayer is that you will visit the work in this catalog and exhibition and build that sense of story for yourself for each of the images contained.

On a personal note, I'm grateful to the Texas Photographic Society, D. Clarke Evans, and all the photographers who submitted work for this show. I'm thankful for their trust in my judgment, and can only hope that they forgive me my trespasses in the final selection, however idiosyncratic and impassioned it might be. I chose to write this essay because it always drove me nuts to be either included in or excluded from an exhibition, and to have no idea why, or what the curator was thinking. So, this is my attempt to provide a bit of closure, a bit of backstory, and to thank you once again for making my life so difficult, and yet so wonderful at the same time.

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