

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

by

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deriving from the photograph's unique relationship to reality.

Photographic Realism and Idealism

The initial enthusiasm for photography was in the spirit of realism, because of the implied objective truthfulness of the optically derived image. But photographers sought elements of expressiveness which would allow them the emotional power of an artist such as Turner. Much of the photographers' initial problems resided in the early processes' tendency to overexpose skies, rendering them featureless in the print. The near-inevitability of an almost featureless atmosphere denied photographers an important pictorial vehicle for the expression of emotion. Some photographers resorted in desperation to composite printing (the combination printing of two negatives, one of clouds and the other of a foreground, into a single print), but the results usually betrayed their manipulations and thereby destroyed the illusion of reality. Not until the early Twentieth Century did technical matters mature to the point where skies could be accurately recorded, and could even be exaggerated in tone and contrast to infuse passion into an image. Concurrent with these technical developments were conscious manifestations of realism and idealism in landscape photography based on photographers now possessing additional dimensions of choice in their aesthetic use of the medium.

Ansel Adams, himself an important contributor to the technical advances in photography, emerged in the 1930's as a master of personal

expression through landscape. To this day his work stands as a model of photographic idealism. Adams refers to his work as "departures from reality" for the purposes of "emotional effect".²³ But photographic expression entails more restraint than the visions of a Turner, a restraint dictated by the optically derived image. Idealism in landscape photography has relied less on the invention of scenes as on the metamorphosis of carefully selected existing ones. The orchestration of tonalities and values, and distortion through selection of lens and point of view are two notably effective kinds of photographic metamorphosis.

Adams explains the paradoxical balance between fact and fiction in his photographs this way:

"The viewer may accept...[my photographs]...as realistic because the visual effect may be plausible but if it were possible to make direct visual comparison with the subjects, the differences would be startling."²⁴

Through subtle manipulation, an idealist landscape photographer like Adams infuses his ideas into the image while maintaining an illusion of reality. Adams illustrates the practical side of his approach with two versions of his Monolith, The Face of Half Dome (Figures 3 and 4). In terms of black and white values, the first version is close to a literal rendering of the scene, but this image fell short of Adams' desired effect. Adams relates the episode:

"I realized after exposing that the image would not express the particular mood the scene evoked. I visualized a dark sky, deeper shadows and a crisp horizon in the distance... With my one remaining plate I used the #29 dark red filter, achieving very much the effect I wanted."²⁵

The second version of "Half Dome" resulted (Figure 4), gaining through Adams' management an ominous dramatic quality evoking the powerful forces in nature which Adams senses within the landscape. No longer just a record of a place, the image has been transformed into an impassioned realization of Adams' inner feelings, infusing his mind into the landscape via subtle, but effective, control of the tones in the image.

Photographic realism also reached a pinnacle in the 1930's in the work of Walker Evans. Working in a medium which had proven its ability to be emotionally expressive, Evans chose instead to emphasize the literal and descriptive potential of photography.

John Szarkowski has described Evans' work as being "rooted in the ...precise and lucid description of significant fact."²⁸ While that summation has merit, it falls short of explaining Evans' real power which, as with Constable, lies in his ability to bring facts to life. An image that demonstrates Evans' unusual faculties is Post Office, Spratt, Alabama, 1936 (Figure 5). This image transcends mere documentation. It is a picture which seems more a caricature of the people who inhabit the place than a record of vernacular southern architecture. It is difficult to explain how the image achieves this effect. It seems to do it by a combination of formal juxtapositions (the receding road sweeps around the static frontal form of the projecting building) and richly allusive information that gives us an intimation of the people that inhabit the area. More than just a document of significant facts, this image is an intriguing clue, or artifact, from another place and time.

A complete copy of this thesis, with illustrations, is available from the author. Make your request using the email address listed on the Kirk Gittings website.