

***Into the Light*, by Sheona Beaumont. Published in *Art and Christianity* No.73, Spring 2013, pp.2-5**

Ansel Adams: Photography from the Mountains to the Sea, National Maritime Museum

Light From the Middle East: New Photography, Victoria and Albert Museum

Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present, National Gallery

In the 21st-century art world, exhibitions of photography are increasingly finding institutional support and recognition. From the Tate's first major photography exhibition 'Cruel and Tender' in 2003 to the V&A's opening of its permanent Photographs Gallery in 2011, photography is being put on the museum map, in addition to the already burgeoning gallery map. In the 2012/13 season alone, recent major shows include 'William Klein & Daido Moriyama' at Tate Modern, 'Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'The Birth of Photography: Milestones of the Gernsheim Collection' at the Reiss Engelhorn Museums (Mannheim) and to be opened later in 2013 at the new Media Space in the Science Museum 'Revelations: Experiments in Photography'. Here I review three concurrent photography exhibitions in major London venues.

In a display of over 100 original prints, the National Maritime Museum presents *Ansel Adams: Photography from the Mountains to the Sea*. From muffled, vaporous clouds to sharp plumes of waterfall or geyser, water is the theme for an exhibition that celebrates the formal lyricism of Adams' inspiring photographs. There are striking images of the curl of foam and ripple as the sea skims shores of dark sand, including a series of *Surf Sequence*, 1940, frames on the beach at San Mateo (County Coast, California). There are expansive views of the rugged mountains and crisp snow-lined valleys of Yosemite National Park and Grand Teton National Park. There are also intricate textured details in photographs of seaweed, ice and floating grasses.

Given such a homogenising theme, it can seem unnecessary, even impossible, to move beyond the magnetism of such technically accomplished photographs: Adams undoubtedly has been, and is, widely celebrated for a style with articulate and refined compositions, dramatic contrasts and an all-pervading sharpness of focus. When in 1932 he formed, along with six others, Group f/64 it was to promote photography that celebrated the camera's clear vision, needing no other introduction. Yet, for Adams, it was also a way of seeing that suggested the immediacy of nature, along with the unhindered capacity of the mind's eye to be a part of this immediacy.

Adams' work presents the apparent contradiction of an isolated inhuman perspective on the world with that of complete absorption and identification with(in) it. Enlarging on his friend and colleague Alfred Stieglitz's well-known term 'equivalent', Adams thought that his photographs presented not just a view but an equivalent in terms of the emotions he felt at the time. He said that 'a great photograph is one that fully expresses what one feels, in the deepest sense, about what is being photographed.'¹ As well as emotional meaning, his work has also become resonant with spiritual meaning, one concerned with our connectedness to the land and environment. In the early 1920s, Adams is known to have converted to Edward Carpenter's monism, celebrating the wholeness of the universe, and, for Adams, nature in its entirety was 'the vast expression of ideas within the Cosmic mind'.² Later in life, Adams' assistant of nearly ten years said of his work, it is 'a kind of visual [John] Muir, a symbol of conscience, of reverence, of caring for the land.'³

If the photographs themselves are only implicitly cosmological, rather than explicitly so, it is because Adams is always intuitively engaged with picturing what he calls 'configurations', not 'integrations'.⁴ He does not seek to impose on the image, but rather to find a synthesis, an extraction from/of nature, in which he himself is implicated. There is, in the varied sizes of his prints from the six foot murals for The American Trust Company to the six inch enamel-like jewels of the Merced River, a sense of corporeal engagement with the

¹ Quoted in the Exhibition Guide, *Ansel Adams: Photography from the Mountains to the Sea*, London: National Maritime Museum, 2012.

² A letter of 22nd September 1925, quoted in Anne Hammond, "Ansel Adams and Georgia O'Keeffe: On the Intangible in Art and Nature," *History of Photography*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Winter 2008, p.307.

³ Andrea G. Stillman (ed.), *Ansel Adams: 400 Photographs* (New York & London: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), p.9.

⁴ Terms used by Adams in the exhibition's films. Two short interview excerpts from: *BBC Masters: Ansel Adams*, 1983 (dir. Peter Adams), and *Ansel Adams: A Documentary Film*, 2002 (dir. Ric Burns).

image. Adams famously described the printing process as being like that of the performance of a piece of music, of which the score was the negative. Such an attentive position bears out his precise articulation of a holistic, embracing vision and owes more to a spiritual conception of beauty than an aesthetic one.

If the National Maritime Museum seems an unlikely place for a large exhibition of fine art photography, the V&A has extended its promotion of the medium with *Light From the Middle East: New Photography*. In this, an Art Fund sponsored exhibition brings together over 90 works from 30 artists, broadly representative of contemporary practice in the greater Middle Eastern area (including North Africa). Photographs range from black and white documentary coverage of conflict (including work from the 'Iran Diary' series of the well-known Magnum member Abbas), to wry commentary on the incorporation of Western materialism by Islamic culture.

Less a critical engagement with familiar political and religious topics, than a conceptual arrangement of different approaches to image-making, the exhibition presents artists who 'investigate the language and techniques of photography'.⁵ 'Recording', 'Reframing' and 'Resisting' are the titles given to the three rooms of the exhibition, within which artists explore such media-interventions as digital and paper collage, scratched or burned prints, and assemblage framing. The highly successful film of Jananne Al-Ani, *Shadow Sites II*, 2011, builds a sequence of desert aerial photographs into a semblage of stealth-like movement with slow zooms and closely-aligned fades, accompanied by a soundtrack of background noise from both ground and air.

In some instances, the imagery seems too quick to connote, rather than denote, to borrow Roland Barthes' terms. 'At once invisible and active, clear and implicit,'⁶ connotation plunges the viewer into the ready assimilation of cultural codes: so we see and immediately grasp the visual cliché of Shadi Ghadirian's series *Qajar*, 1998, featuring Iranian portrait photography with traditionally-dressed sitters holding a soft-drinks can, or sitting alongside a mountain bike. Burqa-clad women show off their Louis Vuitton accessories in Hassan Hajjaj's *Jama Fna Angels*, 2000, and in a reference to Manet's *Olympia*, 1863, Raeda Saadeh's self-portrait *Who Will Make me Real?*, 2003, shows the artist in a similarly reclining pose, wrapped in Palestinian newspaper.

The photography becomes more interesting in its playing to the slow-burning strength of denotation: 'the message without a code'⁷ that underwrites any rhetorical or artistic inflexion carried by the image. So the hyperreal clarity of Tal Shocat's series of fruit tree studies (*Persimmon (Afarseman)*, *Pomegranate (Rimon)* and *Grapefruit (Eshkolit)*, 2010-11, reflect an absurdly unnatural state of perfected ripeness. Meticulously cleaned and separated against a black background, these naturally-growing trees thwart an Edenic lushness with their knowingly artificial and contrived image. Similarly subtle, *Magnetism I* and *II*, 2012, by Ahmed Mater seem to depict pilgrims circling the Ka'ba in Mecca, but in fact show the close-up view of iron filings drawn to a cube-shaped magnet. Here, the technique of scale and tilt-shift effect (whether in camera or digitally produced) present a dislocation of spatial relationship that comments on the abstracted symbol of religious festival.

Noticeably, the absence of the human figure in these two examples lends photography a way out of short-circuited documentary imagery. Depictions of a Sufi festival by Issa Touma, 1995-2005, certainly bring us into the circle of Islamic practice that otherwise discourages representation of the human form, but here, as elsewhere in the exhibition, the images of crowds and worshippers remain the documented 'other'. A more suggestive invitation to assess the incarnational and interdependent aspect of belief and faith comes in the series *Light*, 2006, by Waheeda Malullah, who photographs herself lying next to simple white-tiled tombs in Bahrain. She comments on the Shi'i Muslim custom of seeking blessing by touching the tombs of revered people, occasionally with light-heartedness, and also more poignantly in the image of her cruciform body with arms stretching across tombs on either side of her.

⁵ From the V&A website, accessed 21/12/12. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-light-from-the-middle-east-new-photography/about-the-exhibition/>

⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.19.

⁷ *ibid*, p.17.

Such human presence is undoubtedly a key way in which a viewer finds in photography an immediate context, if not close identification. The work of Adams, in marked contrast, is completely devoid of figures. We may well ask what type of photography may include the body, and maintain an open commentary on things felt or intuited (as well as seen), even to a spiritual degree. Such suggestions are found at the National Gallery's *Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present*, where the language of borrowed symbolism from art, or classical and biblical literature opens the door on a style that might be called iconic relating. Here, the influence of the fine art tradition is presented as the 'engine for early photographic innovation, and both these precedents inspire present-day photography.'⁸

One of the largest rooms in the genre-divided exhibition is entitled 'Tableaux', and features a selection of work identified by their reference to allegorical or narrative themes. Dominant on one wall is Thomas Struth's *National Gallery 1, London, 1989*, 1989, which shows gallery goers scrutinizing an early 16th-century altarpiece: a painting of doubting Thomas by Cima da Conegliano found upstairs in the gallery's main collection. The zoned spaces of this picture-within-a-picture reveal how, as watching human figures, we invest belief in the physical inhabiting of our environment. The gallery visitors regard the scene with their backs facing us (the viewers) and lean in towards it, echoing the figures of the disciples and Thomas himself. In addition, the plane of focus, seen more obviously in the print itself, is horizontal, and at the level of Jesus' head. In a beautifully realized way, what might be a single trans-spatial line of unbroken, faith-filled sight becomes an embodied searching for the tangible body.

Such tangible bodies are found in Helen Chadwick's work, particularly her *One Flesh*, 1985, showing a red-cloaked visceral Madonna and Child with a collage of photocopied textures and skin. Seen in proximity to a similar subject represented by Julia Margaret Cameron (*Light and Love*, 1865), the capacity of photography to reflect the changing place of biblical and Christian iconography in art is apparent: on the one hand the endlessly reflexive mode of a self-conscious post-Modernism borrows sign and symbol to cornucopian effect, while on the other, a Victorian sensibility claims an authoritative, if occasionally sentimental, shoring up of moral ideals. Cameron appears elsewhere in the exhibition, in the rooms dedicated to both 'Portrait' and 'Figure', yet the impact of her more conventional reference to the human figure is slight in comparison – here pose and sensibility seem to be the trading cards with art of the past and photography of today.

Occasionally this linking and labelling of early and contemporary photography with art seems convoluted and tenuous: Jeff Wall is surely under-represented with the inclusion of *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, (alongside a small copy of Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus*) instead of the Tate's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*, 1993. What does succeed overall, perhaps contrary to the lineage thesis suggested by the curator, is an interdisciplinary examination of subject treatment. One may well compare, for example, the digitally-constructed Arcadia of Beate Gütschow's clean landscape *LS#13*, 2001, with Roger Fenton's *Paradise*, 1859, a view of an idyllic river scene in Lancashire. Visually, it is a subtle change that distinguishes the 'stubborn lyricism' of the former, despite the inclusion of incidental printers' marks at the edges of the image, from the 'spiritual intent' of the latter.⁹ Fenton, master of multiple genres in his time (including the stereoscopic still life also seen in this exhibition), embraced a pictorial emphasis in such landscapes that reflected the ideal of the Romantic picturesque. This utopian dream cannot quite be expelled from Gütschow's image, even as it is riddled with artificiality.

The powerful, all-embracing lens of the camera, as so clearly defined in Adams' work, turns out to be a distinctively imaginative image-maker. It can leave a trace of cultural *turn* in nuance or extraneous detail, just as much as it can wield forceful artistic rhetoric in elaborate scene-setting tableaux. It is to be hoped that the spiritual and theological aspects of this capacity become more widely studied in visual culture, as a result of the broadening institutional platform offered by such exhibitions as these, and for the enrichment of the many contemporary stories of photography.

⁸ Hope Kingsley, *Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present* (London: National Gallery Co, 2012), p.9.

⁹ *ibid*, p.180, and Gordon Baldwin's essay, "In Pursuit of Architecture," in Sarah Greenough, *All the Mighty World: The Photographs of Roger Fenton, 1852-1860* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), p.59.

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Ansel Adams: Photography from the Mountains to the Sea, until 28 April at the National Maritime Museum, £7 entry, open late on Thursdays.

Light From the Middle East: New Photography, until 7 April at the Victoria and Albert Museum, free entry, open late on Fridays.

Seduced by Art: Photography Past and Present, until 20 January at the National Gallery, £12 entry, open late on Fridays. Touring to CaixaForum Barcelona (21 February – 19 May 2013) and CaixaForum Madrid (19 June – 15 September 2013).

See ACE issue for 3 featured images by Ansel Adams (*Upper Yosemite Fall*, *Yosemite Valley*, c.1960), Shadi Ghadirian (*Qajar*, 1998) and Thomas Struth (*National Gallery 1*, *London 1989*, 1989).