Photography Whatever We Want It to Be

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PHOTOGRAPHY WHATEVER WE WANT IT TO BE

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Contemporary photography has evolved from an orphaned art into a mainstay for global imaging culture. Today anyone can make a picture or image, manipulate it, montage it, and publish it on the Internet. Photographic art practice will always answer back to its history but more importantly and inherent in its digital form and distribution, photographic art is responding to the modern ubiquity of the digital image and digital age.

My response in the digital age of art practice is to slow down, move back, and investigate the origins of image making. I would like to introduce several artists here who have influenced the course that I have taken in developing my own photographic practice and talk a bit about where I think photography is headed.

Influential post modernist artists like Robert Heinecken and John Baldessari from the 1970’s enabled me to see mass media and communications as both an intrusion and influence on our global culture. These artists lifted the surface of commercial and non-commercial photographs that were not their own to create a new context for once familiar public imagery.

Robert Heinecken: Untitled, date unknown. Offset lithograph, 11.1 × 7.9 inches
I have also sought contemporary artists with diverse perspectives that push the boundaries of traditional image making and interpretations of social culture. William Kentridge’s optical devices used to illustrate his artworks have been especially influential because of his interests in perception, in making his audience aware of the process of seeing and how “perception of the world can be constructed by how one looks”. Like Heinecken, Kentridge’s works are often physical and tangible in the way I enjoy working. A convergence of analog and digital media appears in his work such as animated charcoal drawings reflected in anamorphic lenses or creating theatrical opera with hand puppets and digitally projected video animations. Much of his work addresses themes from his life experiences in South Africa and the atrocities of Apartheid. As I redefine where my exploration is taking me, Kentridge brings it all back to a conceptual narrative that speaks to humanity. For me, technology is a tool and a useful one for sharing in our mass communication world.

As I ponder where contemporary photography and practice is today, I often refer to the book, River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West, written by Rebecca Solnit. Solnit discusses how the railroad drastically changed the perception of time and also where Muybridge dovetails in that perception with his photographic inventions in what I call “slicing time”. His life spanned some of the most profound changes in technological history including photography, the railroad and the telegraph. Muybridge became famous for his photography as well as inventions including one device that would make a series of innovative high speed photographs that would reveal a horse’s four feet leaving the ground simultaneously. The ability to freeze high-speed moments of time created a new perspective from which to view the world. Solnit’s book is relevant today as technology continues to transform at exponential speed and Muybridge’s time is a parallel to our own.

When I first read Solnit’s book I was already entrenched in using my body and exploring the process of photography. I created a character for myself that was photographer/magician and put myself in my own photographs. I was harkening back to the early days when photography was magic and when only a select few had cameras and the wherewithal to learn a new technology.

Certainly it was magic to travel as fast as people could on a train as opposed to walking or by horse. One could travel clear across the country in several days rather than weeks. The speed and change was so astounding that it influenced the perception of time.
Eadweard Muybridge, from his Animal locomotion series: An electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movements, 1872-1885

Today we have a different mode of transport that is not by train and it is not physical but virtual - it is the information highway. Everything from text, audio, photos, videos, and videoconferencing is not only instantaneous but global. It is ubiquitous in that almost anyone can take a photo or video and share it immediately by uploading the digital file to their computer and communicating with almost anyone in the world in a matter of seconds or even at real time. You can virtually travel anywhere and never leave your home.

Contemporary artist Jason Salavon reconfigures pre-existing digital media obtained from internet sources in his series “100 Special Moments” to create new interpretations of familiar media mined from the massive glut of personal imagery available online. His ghostly digital subjects are a result of layering 100 internet images that all share the same theme. Some notable images from this series are “Kids with Santa” or “Newlyweds”. By trying to make sense of our world and the influence photography has on our perception, Salavon and other artists today along with Muybridge one hundred+ years prior, give us the tools to place the world in perspective.

Photography’s pervasive influence on global culture intrigues my muse and motivates me to create new interpretations. Again my response is to slow down, move back, investigate the origins of image making to see what are we gaining, what are we losing.
I like to say that my Magician character in my circle of cameras and videos is the illusionist of the past that helps us understand what is happening today.
Understanding that photography propagates illusion is necessary in our world. Korean artist Yeondoo Jung’s artworks create a modern reality that reveals this illusion.

Jung says “People seem to take illusion for granted. Now we have 3D movies in theaters, and the sci-fi films seem so real with all these things being considered common to natural people – I doubt my work would be called illusion. When I think of it, because of movies like Avatar my works can have meaning in a relative way. I create to remind people what reality is about. I would say I’m an anti-illusionist.”

Whether contemporary artists and photographers such as Jung and myself reveal or place a veil over illusion - one thing is for certain – the digital age of photography enables more participation and participants. We are witnessing the democratization of how and when work is created, discovered, and then digested. The evolution of the photographic era is fast on its way to becoming whatever we want it to be.

**Bibliography**
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