

NICHOLAS METIVIER GALLERY

Pictures of Time

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The more I think about it, the less certain I feel that what Ljubodrag Andric does should be called photography. Of course, today, after the digital revolution, it's become less and less clear what photography is anyway. I was recently reflecting on how surprised John Szarkowski would have been to see that the latest installment of the periodic "New Photography" exhibition series he inaugurated at the Museum of Modern Art in New York includes, among other things, carved wooden sculpture, a full-scale three-dimensional replica of a subway station newsstand, and various video works—along with, yes, a number of photographs made by means of the chemical processes Szarkowski was familiar with and many others printed digitally.¹

And yet if the boundaries of photographic practice have worn so thin by now that they are practically non-existent, there is still a certain *idea* of photography that continues to propagate itself. The cultural critic Esther Leslie, in explicating Walter Benjamin's writings on photography, summed up this idea aptly: "It is from photography's relationship to time that its power has been assumed to stem," she explains. "The strange dialectic of photography consists in the fact that it is a more or less instantaneous representation, an imprint of a moment, which immediately begins to date."² Of course Leslie is shrewd enough to hedge the idea of instantaneity—the phrase "more or less" covers a multitude of divergences—but she is right in saying that this idea of instantaneity has conditioned most thinking about photography. It's not accidental that the English word "snapshot" is in French rendered "*instantané*." The underlying fiction of photography is that every photograph is a snapshot, or if not, that it is somehow approaching or falling off from the condition of the snapshot. Even when thinking about nineteenth century portraits whose long exposure times made posing an excruciating process, or when considering works in that "directorial mode" in which much time and labor might have been invested in constructing the scene to be presented to the

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camera, or when examining images that could only have been constructed through the painstaking “post-production” work—as we might now call it—of darkroom wizardry; even in these cases, the tendency is to bracket all that time spent and to see the photograph as the representation, or rather the capture, of an instant.

If you will grant me all that, then you will perhaps understand what I mean in saying that I might hesitate to call Andric’s work photography, even though it is self-evidently photography in that quite literal sense that many things currently being exhibited under the rubric of photography evade. Their relationship to time has nothing at all to do with that “touch of the finger” that according to Benjamin “sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time” so that “the camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were.”³ Andric’s images never seem, in this way, to startle a moment into freezing in its tracks. I have rarely seen images so utterly unlike snapshots as those made by this artist. They don’t, in fact, stop time. Rather, what they do is slow it down, so that time itself can be examined—and more than that, so that it can be experienced, and savored, in its subtly colored vicissitudes.

If I say, however, that Andric’s work has more in common with certain paintings than with most photographs, you are still liable to misunderstand me. Actually, many paintings are not so very different from photographs in this, that they aim to freeze time, to catch the moment unawares. It’s a standard move in portraiture for the painter to show the sitter as if suddenly turning, or looking up from something he’s been concentrating on, or making a not-yet-complete gesture—it lends a sense of life, of spontaneity, to the likeness. In many Abstract Expressionist paintings, on the other hand, it’s the paint itself that seems to have been captured in the very moment of change or of emergence. That kind of painting is profoundly related to what Benjamin and many others have understood as essential to photography. But there’s another kind of painting, perhaps rarer, the painting of stillness, the art in which time has not been suddenly, even violently arrested, but rather in which it has arrived at a point of equilibrium. In this art, time slows down as much as possible but doesn’t stop—it hovers, and as it lingers there, it somehow becomes visible.

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Who are the artists who in this way make time visible? Undoubtedly one thinks of Vermeer first, and not only because of Marcel Proust, for whom (by way of his character Bergotte, a writer like Proust himself) “*un petit pan de mur jaune*,” a little patch of yellow wall in Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, became the very embodiment of “a beauty sufficient to itself” that in some way transcends time and mortality—but does not abrogate them; in fact, this beauty makes us feel time and mortality more deeply, which is why Proust introduces this notion through the death of Bergotte, who, already ill and “not unaware of the gravity of his condition,” collapses after leaving his sickbed to see the painting one last time: “In a celestial pair of scales there appeared to him, weighing down one the pans, his own life, while the other contained the little patch of wall so beautifully painted in yellow. He felt that he had rashly sacrificed the former for the latter.”⁴

Perhaps it is imprudent to invoke a name as hallowed as that of Vermeer. It might be unfair to a contemporary artist to invoke a comparison unlikely to be granted. Let me mention another painted wall, then—by an artist of much less renown, and moreover without any literary pedigree attached to him. Yet we should not forget the Welsh painter Thomas Jones, who was not a particularly outstanding artist until, in 1776 at the age of thirty-four, he began a seven-year sojourn in Italy during which he produced a series of remarkable oil sketches and watercolors, works so strange and original they seem almost unaccountable. Take for example his 1782 *Wall in Naples*, now in the National Gallery, London. Presumably such works were notations for some more elaborate works that Jones had in mind, but in their unutterably frank and flat depictions of walls, and the play of light upon them, in their supreme frontality, in what only a century and a half later one would have learned to call their abstraction, Jones’s sketches remain impressive. Tangential to the historical era in which they were made, they continue to convey a feeling of time displaced.

Jones was a precursor to modernism, albeit unknown to the originators of abstraction (he was rediscovered only in the 1950s, in part thanks to Lawrence Gowing); Andric is one of its successors. It is easy, when thinking about his work, to feel its affinity with certain abstract painting—not so much with its early protagonists such as Mondrian or Malevich as

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with the more expansive painting of artists who hit their stride in the 1950s and '60s, for instance Barnett Newman or Kenneth Noland in the United States, Alberto Burri or Pierre Soulages in Europe. And yet while Andric has learned much from abstract painting—learned, for instance, how a fundamentally simple and straightforward form of organization can allow the optical and haptic sensations borne by the image to take on greater autonomy and intensity—it is absolutely essential to his images that they are not abstract, that they are pictures of places, as their very titles remind us.

An artist like Jones was able to perceive the abstract in the phenomenal world, and did so, moreover, before the abstract, in this sense, had even been named or spoken of—how strange! But because this thing he perceived had no name, nothing to identify it, he could not bring it to fruition as a work. Andric is in a different position. He is the inheritor of a culture that has already put its finger on abstraction, and has distilled it into extraordinary works of art accepted as such by a public that has learned to understand them. For that very reason there is no longer any need for “pure” abstraction, for an art that must convince its public that the abstract is sufficient. Andric suggests that the abstract feelings to be found by way of actual places, far from being diluted by compromise, are as resonant and powerful as those without any referent in reality.

That Andric's works always show us a place, letting it spread itself out before our gaze, is crucial. Equally crucial is that the place is observed with such particularity that it can no longer accord with our idea of that place: One of his images from San Francisco, for instance, does not give us any significant sociological or topographical information about the city by the bay. It is not documentary. It is about an experience of perception, yet one that did not take place in San Francisco but only before the image itself, though it is necessarily an image whose origin is in San Francisco.

It is an experience founded in the experience of duration. It is not a flash, not a glimpse, not a shock. The image slows us down, cultivating a quiet receptiveness on the viewer's part. It is not to be stared at; anything like a fixed gaze is disarmed here. You want to be with it, next to it, rather than to penetrate it. In that sense it serves as a wall as well as

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picturing one. And yet, not exactly. Notice that there is typically a band corresponding to the ground plane at the bottom of one of Andric's pictures. Usually this is without any linear marking that would emphasize perspectival recession so there is no visual insistence than its being anything other than parallel to the picture plane, like the wall above it. However, one is always aware of the ambiguous nature of this zone: It marks an interval between the surface of the image and the depicted surface. In one of the most beautiful of the San Francisco images, some moss growing up the bottom of a concrete wall seems to mimic the light grass growing on one tract of ground beneath it, creating a rhythm of alternation—gray, green, gray, green, with the differences between the grays and the differences between the greens syncopating the rhythm—that further effaces the ninety-degree difference between the two planes they ought to occupy. There is a resonant space separating the viewer and the image and yet this space tends to become as attenuated as possible. Finally, the image is not there—it is in me. This too is the work of time.

¹ See my article "Photography in Quotes," *The Nation*, January 21, 2016, pp. 27-30; online as "Point First, Shoot Later," <http://www.thenation.com/article/point-first-shoot-later/>.

² Esther Leslie, "Introduction: Walter Benjamin and the Birth of Photography," in Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. and tr. by Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), p. 31.

³ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," quoted by Leslie, p. 30. See also Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 328.

⁴ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume 5: The Captive; The Fugitive*, tr. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revised by D.J. Enright (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), pp. 244-45.