

“Pepper #30” is one of funniest pictures in the history of art. Amy Kubes has obviously seen the same thing.

Paranoia for shut-ins, the vengeance of the repressed, an Ikea catalog for the deranged, nesting with The Blob, at home with Franz, a virgin’s nightmares—many alternate titles suggest themselves for this volume. But Amy Kubes has wisely allowed the burlesque edge of her world to emerge on its own, as it did in the development of her work. Whatever else it does, and it surely does many things, the final section, “Little Worries,” has a bit of fun with the portentousness and hysteria of some of the pictures in the earlier sections. In doing so she reminds us of what she has no need to remind herself: the penumbra of disgust and fear that shadows the photographs in the first two sections of the book originates in the eye that sees rather than the fruit that secretes. What is most impressive about *Surrogate* is that Amy Kubes never loses her grip; she keeps her head even as the narrator of this tale teeters on the verge of losing hers. She provides a map to a Fun House/House of Horrors, not the ride itself. The tone she establishes allows real terror to coexist with real jokes, “Help!” and “Oops!” to come out of the same mouth at the same time. The world turns strange on us all the time; the adaptive response is to ignore it, but the cost of this turning away is the impoverishment of ordinary experience, the vast preponderance of our waking lives. Amy Kubes gives us, in addition to the pleasure we take from any object as beautiful, rich, and well-made as *Surrogate*, a model for restoring to the everyday a portion of the fascination, terror, and hilarity that infuse it. Openness, vision, talent, courage, will, and an acute appreciation for the absurd are all that are required.

Photography and Place: The Concord Photographs of Herbert W. Gleason [2005]

THERE WAS A TIME BEFORE which Photography did not exist. This is an unexceptional statement, albeit that locating that moment precisely can provoke heated disagreements between people for whom it matters. There was a time before which the idea of Place—in the modern sense that informs this conference [Society for Photographic Education National Conference, 2004]—was unknown, although identifying when that was is an even more elusive and contentious task than pinning down the invention of photography. For the sake of my argument, however, let us agree on the French Government’s announcement of Daguerre’s invention on August 19, 1839, in Paris as the birth of Photography. On that date, Photography entered public consciousness and began contributing its large share of the enormous social and cultural changes that would create the modern world. It may be merely an interesting historical coincidence, or it may be more than that, but it was in those

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Herbert W. Gleason, *Shad-Bush in Blossom*, Concord, Massachusetts, ca. 1906.

same years that the modern idea of place began gestating in the mind of Henry David Thoreau in Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau hardly needs any introduction, but he might benefit from some re-introduction. He has often been both praised and criticized for being something he is not: a child of Nature, an

apostle of wilderness. What he is, is harder to pin down. For his neighbors he was an unsuccessful manufacturer (pencils were the family business), surveyor, loafer, and crank. Although he would be delighted to claim the last two, he would probably want to include rambler, student of Nature, writer, and citizen of Concord to make the list complete. All of these make him an appropriate figure through which to approach the question of "Place."

Thoreau's counterpart in photography, Herbert Gleason¹, was just seven years old, living in Waltham, Massachusetts, when Thoreau died in 1862. Gleason photographed from 1899, the year he took up photography at the age of forty-four, until 1933, three years before his death at eighty-one. He was chosen to provide the photographs for the publication in 1906 of the manuscript edition of *The Writings of Thoreau*, but his immersion in the world of Thoreau and his writings had begun at least ten years earlier. His first photographs of Concord were made in the first year of his new career (he had been a Congregationalist minister). Until recently he has been little known outside of Concord and the world of Thoreau scholars and enthusiasts, who have revered him as much for his map of Concord identifying the places mentioned by Thoreau in his writing as for his photographs; but at the height of his career he was in great demand as a lecturer on a number of subjects,

1 Leslie Perrin Wilson, "The Herbert Wendell Gleason Negatives in the Concord Free Public Library: Odyssey of a Collection." *The Concord Saunterer* 7 (1999) 171–192. See also "Herbert W. Gleason: A Photographer's Journey to Thoreau's World" by Dale R. Schwie in the same issue of *The Concord Saunterer*. Many additional photographs and a wealth of other material relating to both Gleason and Thoreau are readily accessible on the Concord Free Public Library's excellent website, www.concordnet.org/library. Click on Special Collections.

including Concord and Thoreau, accompanied with lantern slides that were hand tinted by his wife. At one point he listed thirty-three different programs he was available to present to interested audiences; the fees from his lectures were one of his primary sources of income. The topics were historical, scenic, geographical, botanical, and literary. For twenty years he trekked back and forth across the United States, photographing the existing and prospective national parks for the first director of the Park Service, Stephen Mather. The work was published widely; but however extensive his travels, his heart remained in Concord. He died in 1936.

Among the few positive things we humans may do that other species don't is to create Places. We can quibble about the details, but most people who have thought seriously about the matter would recognize a few necessary components in any satisfactory definition: places, like landscapes, do not occur naturally; they are artifacts. A place is not a landscape; places are contained within landscapes. Place is a possibility wherever humans linger, but it's not inevitable. Sometimes we just occupy space. Places can be created intentionally or as a side effect of other actions with other intentions. Place seems to be more likely to come into being the longer we stay put, but many nomadic cultures roam in landscapes whose minutest features are named, recognized, and given a place in the story of a people and a world.

Place has something to do with memory. The evidence of the actions of human beings in a specific locale constitutes a physical version of memory. In the visible traces of their passage I read the investment of desire, hope, ambition, sweat, toil, and love of people who set this location apart from raw space. I don't need to identify the origin of every feature to sense its significance. The intentions of the inhabitants may be opaque

to me; I only need to be aware that intentions were acted on here. Long-enduring Places demonstrate Wright Morris's dictum that the things we care about don't so much get worn out as worn in. Some would go further and say that the vital energies, positive and negative, that are discharged on a site create a psychic echo chamber in which what happened there can continue to reverberate indefinitely. It is that faith which informs Joel Sternfeld's pictures of locations associated with horrific crimes, utopian communities, and the civilization of ancient Rome, moments whose perturbations can persist for millennia. It is the logic behind the preservation of battlefields.

Human history takes many forms, some material, some mental: Place partakes of both. One way to define Place in a few words, in fact, might be as a unique and significant intersection in space of human history and natural history. Is the Grand Canyon a Place? In what sense? When did it become a Place? When the first human being set eyes on it? When the first band of Archaic hunters camped on its rim or along the river at the bottom? When the first story about it was made? The first permanent settlement? When the first photograph was taken? When Congress made it a National Park? Or was it when the uplift of the Colorado Plateau and the downcutting of the Colorado River began 17,000,000 years ago?

Human effort did not create the Grand Canyon, but human ingenuity exploits it as a tourist destination and human imagination recognizes in it a potent emblem of American singularity, grandeur, and mighty destiny. Prior to the twentieth century, it seems to me, this public sense of Place was predominant. Places are elements in a symbolic discourse about History, which is itself a theater of power whose actors strive for the right to determine the future, their own and everyone else's.

The notion of place I began sketching a moment ago is by contrast suited to smaller aggregations of people—tribes, bands, families of all kinds, down to single individuals—rather than nations. I take it that the *experience* of Place I'm trying to articulate has been around a long time, maybe as long as the human species. Maybe it begins in the perception that some locations offer more than others, in food, resources, security, or comfort. But it's one thing to have an experience, another to reflect on it.

Thoreau is the first writer to devote himself single-mindedly to what has come to be known as "The Literature of Place." Thoreau doesn't talk about Place as a concept, he enacts it. He writes in, from, and to the territory he writes about; the idea informs everything he does: his daily walks, his work as a surveyor, where he travels, what he notices, what he writes, what he thinks. The Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, were similarly inspired by the qualities that inhered in certain treasured locations. But where Thoreau's aim is to comprehend with greater and greater clarity the vast system of Nature by minute observation of its ordinary transactions, the Romantics seek Transport; their observations and perceptions are important to the degree that they are a platform from which the Imagination can begin its flights to higher realms of being. They continually contrast an unsatisfactory present with an exalted state, timeless and placeless, to which certain natural scenes offer a portal, leaving behind ordinary nature with its ceaseless round of generation, mortal struggle, and extinction. Thoreau, on the other hand, no matter how far he travels, imaginatively or bodily, returns to the here and now of Concord and the nineteenth century. Transcendence exists in the present moment or not at all. "I came into this world, not

chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad."

Thoreau is living at a time when age-old patterns of living are changing. Change is a constant in human affairs as in nature, but cultural change, historical change, is only as old as history itself. However long ago that might have been, it's but a tiny fraction of the time our problematic species has existed. Agriculture, cities, and writing all emerged within the last 10,000–20,000 years. An instant later on the geological clock and we're walking on the moon, communicating wirelessly, and carrying a library's worth of data and a university's worth of computing power under our arms. Thoreau lived at a time when the accelerating tempo of change is both a commonplace and a source of anxiety. The cumulative effects of so many transformations in so many areas of life are so dramatic that observers with perspicacity and a keen awareness of history like Thoreau and Emerson and the other sages of Concord can begin to put together a coherent picture of the present and draw implications for the future.

Thoreau was no Luddite. He liked being able to hop on a train for Cape Cod or Maine, or a steamboat up the Mississippi to Minnesota. But his preferred mode of transportation was his feet, and his preferred mode of walking was the *saunter*, not confined to trails, direction altered at will, destination unspecified, forward progress open to interruption any time something worthy of close attention presented itself.² Thoreau's quarrel was not with the modern world's machines, but with

2 For a fascinating, entertaining, and instructive account of an attempt to have a Thoreauvian saunter in the contemporary landscape of subdivisions and office parks, roads and freeways overflowing with traffic, and property line hysteria, where every square foot is either preserved or posted see *Walking Toward*

its attitudes. If the quest for property and position forces one to move so fast that the world becomes a blur, have none of it. "Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." If one's possessions are an obstacle to the full enjoyment of the world's true riches, all of which are free for the noticing, then be rid of them. "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."

Thoreau's alarm is expressed in innumerable aphorisms, in tones ranging from controlled indignation, sardonic observation, biting humor, and preacherly admonition. As far as he was concerned the bourgeois strivers of Concord, for all their stolid, self-satisfied virtue and lack of imagination, were completely unhinged. In a secularized paraphrase of the Biblical "for what doth it profit a man if he gain the world and lose his own soul?" Thoreau reminds us that, "Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize the infinite extent of our relations." His remedy for himself is simple: "[I] must be out-of-doors enough to get experience of wholesome reality, as a ballast to thought and sentiment. Health requires this relaxation, this aimless life."

For Thoreau pursuing an intimate knowledge of your surroundings is valuable because it grounds you in the concrete, in the Now, and helps you hold on to yourself in a time of incessant, dizzying change. What we now call a "Sense of Place" was for Henry Thoreau just a matter of planting your

Walden by John Hanson Mitchell (Addison Wesley, 1995). And anything else by Mitchell as well.

feet solidly somewhere so that the soul can take root and be nourished by the connection. Where is inconsequential, since wild nature thrives in the cracks of a sidewalk. Someone who could say, "Convince me you have a seed there and I am prepared to expect Wonders," would not accept living in a city as an adequate excuse for not paying grateful attention to where you are.

In the concluding chapter of *Landscape and Memory* (1995) Simon Schama observes:

... although we generally think of Thoreau as the guardian of wilderness, one of his most powerful passions was for the local and intimate; hence the force of his wonderful oxymoron: "I have traveled a good deal in Concord." He had indeed, and it is from the close familiarity of those "travels" that the unparalleled vividness and precision of his nature writing arises.

Vivid, precise, intimate, local—all adjectives that could be applied to photographs since their invention (three years before Thoreau and his brother pushed off from the bank of the Sudbury River to begin the trip that would be memorialized in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* [1845].) Until the twentieth century, however, all four terms could rarely have been applied to a single photographer's production. I leave it to the historians in my audience to decide if that generalization bears up under scrutiny. I can think of individual photographs of Le Gray, Marville, and P. H. Emerson which might simultaneously display all four qualities, but the first photographer the majority of whose production can be characterized thus is Atget.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Pictorialism was the dominant mode among photographers who wanted to join the established art world of galleries and museums. Despite the vast differences that divided the photographers who shared that name, they were united in their determination to be taken seriously as artists. To many of them, that meant suppressing features of the camera image that reminded one of its optical and mechanical geneses. Outside of this rarefied world the rest of the universe went on as usual, with the customary getting and spending and everything that that entails. I doubt there is anything photographers now do in terms of business that they weren't doing in 1900. The technology changes how they accomplish their assignments, but the demands of commerce have been relatively constant over the course of the intervening hundred years. Snapshooters happily snap their family, friends and themselves doing ... almost anything. Legions of pros put the indelible stamp of history on weddings, funerals, meetings of Oddfellows, manufactured products, news events, houses, industrial processes, and the human visage. There is a small contingent who do not fit comfortably in any of these categories, at least in retrospect: photographers whose work is more interesting than it ought to be, given the nature of their ambition as far as that can be known. They appear in likely and unlikely places like Paris, Heber Springs, Arkansas, the Hampton Institute, New Orleans, and Concord, Massachusetts.

The parallels between Atget and Herbert Gleason are striking. They were born a year apart (1856 and 1855 respectively); they both had established careers which they left around the age of forty to devote themselves to photography; they both spent many years compiling an exhaustive survey of a single geographically confined locale; and they both labored in some degree of isolation from the leading artistic currents of the

day. Each is an intensely private photographer who maintains the most intimate connections with the scenes and objects he photographs; indeed I often feel with Atget that I am allowed to accompany him on his rambles only if I don't raise my voice and scare away the ghosts. The counterpart in Gleason of the stillness that permeates Atget's photographs is the soft rustle and buzz of the New England countryside. The paths that Atget wove through Paris and its outskirts were determined in part by his drive to "possess all of Old Paris," and in part by the exigencies of his business. Gleason's course was as nearly identical to Thoreau's as he could gather from his writings, especially the million words of his *Journals*. Just as Atget was most deeply moved by the vestiges of the ancient culture of France, vanishing quickly before the depredations of Time and the assaults of Modernity, Gleason sought to recover the Concord of a half-century before, which had fewer trees and more farms. Both were engaged in a monumental act of the imagination, recreating a world which no longer existed from the scraps that remained to be seen and photographed.

There is a deeper connection between the two, which has to do with the way they photographed the vastly different worlds they confronted. Their subject matter is likely to be considered ordinary and unremarkable, even boring, by the practical and utilitarian standards of the world at large. It is not redeemed by any notable scenic value, and its novelty quotient is zero. Both usually stand far enough away from things to create habitable spaces, but not so far that we feel lost in the expanse. (They both created specimens by moving in very close as well.) Both photographers, in other words, apprehend the world as a collection of places, each of which has the power to awaken unexpected feelings and connect us to our common world in ways

that are intensely physical and simultaneously hint at something ineffable.

Although Atget began to find a sympathetic public beyond his clientele soon after his death, it was not until the 1960s that he began to influence young photographers who were able to recognize the implications of his work for landscape photography and acknowledge the debt.

Whether because the familiar spirits of Concord were less potent or their servant less avid, or because Concord and Boston (even though it is the Hub of the Universe and home of the World Champion Boston Red Sox, 1918 and 2004) were not as central to the international art world as Paris from 1910 to 1930, Gleason's impact on the course of photography has been negligible. Which is decidedly not to say that his work is negligible. At the time he worked no one but Atget made pictures like his in their ability to seize a germ of extraordinary possibilities in the guise of the everyday, nor would they for another fifty years. Gleason's reconstruction of Thoreau's Concord is a manual for reading a landscape whose very ordinariness was one of its most treasured qualities. In Gleason's patient, unforced penetration of Concord's overworked fields and forests, whose intricate harmonies Thoreau had so delighted to unravel, understand and celebrate, we discover for ourselves the inexhaustible richness of the world just beyond our doorstep.

Jack Lueders-Booth

[2005]

IN THESE PHOTOGRAPHS JACK LUEDERS-BOOTH introduces us to a world made of garbage. Were we residents of that world we would walk, sit, sleep, work, and play on garbage. Garbage would clothe us, feed us, and cover our bones when we die. If we lived on the dump and had no knowledge of the world outside, the endless procession of overflowing vehicles discharging their bounty in our midst might seem miraculous, manna, a gift from God. As it is, both they as the inhabitants of this world and we as viewers are aware that the first noteworthy element here is also the most ordinary: what a large city discards can sustain a small one. Not ordinary at all is the resilience, the capacity for hope, the sheer will to survive of the community we are introduced to through the pictures in this book. We cannot help but admire them and be humbled by the evidence of joy and beauty in lives whose material circumstances are inconceivably poorer than our own. We are grateful they opened their arms and their homes to a photographer

Afterword to *Inherit the Land* by Jack Lueders-Booth (Pond Press, 2005).