



Sunday, May. 17, 2009

The Art and Heart of Blind Photographers

By Matt Kettmann / Santa Barbara

Blind photography: the very concept sounds like an oxymoron. But an intriguing and often striking exhibition of photographs in Riverside, California, argues that it emanates from the core of contemporary art. The show "Sight Unseen," at the California Museum of Photography until Aug. 29, features everything from underwater scenes off Catalina Island, transvestites in New Orleans and Braille-enhanced black-and-whites as well as portraits, nudes, landscapes, travel shots, abstracts, collages, and everything else you might expect from a "sighted" photographer. Except the subtext and context is blindness: the photographers are legally blind, some born without sight or with limited vision, and others who have lost their vision over time. And that is why, argues the man who organized the show, they are at the very heart of art.

"The whole trajectory of modern art for the last 100 years has been toward the concept of mental construction, and blind photography comes from that place," says the show's "sighted" curator Douglas McCulloh, himself a photographer. "They're creating that image in their head first — really elaborate, fully realized visions — and then bringing some version of that vision into the world for the rest of us to see." A sample of the photographs posted by TIME.com received a huge amount of attention. ([See pictures by blind photographers here.](#))

How do the blind take their photographs? Some rely on assistants to set up and then describe the shots, and others just point and shoot in the right place. "Just like any good artists," says McCulloh, "they have their unique ways of operating."

One participating photographer is Pete Eckert, an artist with multiple degrees in design and sculpture who only turned to photography after losing his vision in the mid-1980s. He opens the shutter on his camera and then uses flashlights, lasers, lighters, and candles to paint his scene on film. He explains: "The human brain is wired for optical input, for visualization. The optic nerve bundle is huge. Even with no input, or maybe especially with no input, the brain keeps creating images. I'm a very visual person, I just can't see." "Sighted photographers always talk about the difficulty of what they call 'seeing,'" Eckert adds. "I tell them 'If you can't see, it's because your vision is getting in the way.'"

Kurt Weston's dark and depressing images — many of which are stylized self-portraits — are also a star of the show. A former fashion photographer in Chicago, Weston lost his vision due to AIDS in 1996, and focuses his lens, and sometimes simply his scanner, on images of decay and disability. "I not only want to look at these things, photograph these things, but put an exclamation point on them," he explains. "I'm saying, 'You need to look at this disabled body, this aging body. And maybe you need to reconsider your ideas about what is normal or abnormal. You need to look, and I'm going to make you look.'"

Perhaps the most experienced blind photographers come from New York City's Seeing With Photography Collective, which has been shooting blind since 1988 under the direction of Mark Andres. The Riverside exhibition features some collaborative group work, but also pieces by individual members. One of those is Sonia Soberats, who explains, "When I tell people I do photography, they don't believe me. When a person achieves something that others think you can't because you are blind, you feel it much more." Another individually recognized collective artist is Steven Erra, who says, "I only see parts of things at a time, very small areas at one time. These pictures that we're taking now concentrate on one area at a time. A sharpness, a blurriness, a sharpness, a blurriness, your eyes are always going from one to the other, which is how I view the world, too."

McCulloh has been pursuing these blind photographers for more than a decade, and began pitching the idea of this show four years ago. But the time became right this year, he says because "I'm convinced of its importance. The main trigger is that I've seen a real groundswell of interest around the world in a whole lot of different places, including Tel Aviv, Czechoslovakia, Mexico City, London, Los Angeles.... I felt like the movement was really there." Thanks to crowds and critical acclaim, the exhibit seems likely to show again in Mexico City after leaving Riverside.

What do gallery-goers say? "I was very impressed by it. The technique and experience and technical ability that was within the group was amazingly diverse," says John Hesketh, a printmaker in Anaheim. "You never have a sense of feeling sorry for these people because they've worked very hard to be where they're at."

Next door to the museum is the Sweeney Art Gallery, where curator Tyler Stallings has seen a steady stream of visitors. "It's definitely a show that's brought in a lot of people who may have never been here, even though they live in the area," says Stallings. He notes that while the show certainly has a curiosity element, the work is not presented in a "superficial" way. He explains that shows that target a "self-defined" community, such as a certain ethnicity, "can oftentimes make it a marginalized exhibition. What's nice about this show is that Doug made an amazing effort to make it international and to really get quality artwork."

Beyond the praise, however, the exhibition also marks another milestone for disabled people everywhere. That point was explained most poignantly in early May during a panel discussion on the show. At the very end of the talk, one attendee summed it up: "This exhibition is landmark and revolutionary for many reasons.... Because the work is dignified by being at a museum, it's not a question just of the history of photography, but the history of the civil rights movement. I think that by being an artist with a disability, you are continuing the work of those people who fought for basic civil rights to gain access and to have a voice. In that way, it's so wonderful that your

photographs say it all."

And such tenacity at getting their work recognized is certainly something that McCulloh the curator can appreciate. "These people combine two traits," he says. "They're all intensely visual. They just can't see — and that expresses itself in a whole variety of ways. The other one is they're furiously independent and determined. This is a group that does not say 'quit' in any way." Or as Weston says, "I guess it's God's little joke, having someone who is legally blind do so well in the visual arts."

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