



# THE MATTER WITH SUBJECT MATTER

*by*

Brooks Jensen

I was recently doing a bit of research by scanning through and taking some measurements in each of the 200 or so photography books that I own. The purpose of this project was to compile some information about book design. I examined each book without paying much attention to the images or the subject matter, but rather looking at page layouts and other such non-photographic aspects of these publications.

I was about three-quarters through my library of books when it suddenly occurred to me that I kept seeing the same subject matter over and over and over again. I got bugged by this idea, so I began the scan of my bookshelves a second time, looking this time at subject matters only. I was amazed to see how frequently I saw the same subject matter

photographed in similar but slightly different variations. It was a fascinating revelation.

Why do we see certain subjects so frequently photographed? Certainly we must be quickly approaching some form of critical mass of photographs of:

sand dunes,  
 nudes in sand dunes,  
 Yosemite National Park,  
 crashing waves at the ocean,  
 contorted naked women,  
 scenics with a mountain in the  
 background and a lake in the  
 foreground,  
 scenics with a mountain in the  
 background and a river in the  
 foreground,  
 scenics with a mountain in the  
 background and a pond in the  
 foreground,  
 each of the above without the  
 mountain,  
 the church at Taos, New Mexico,  
 barns,  
 cowboys,  
 vegetables,  
 flower blossoms,  
 bizarre rock formations in Utah and  
 Arizona,  
 and antisocial lifestyles.

(There are more themes that are universally common, but I think you get the point.) *Certainly there must be more things than this that could be interesting to photograph!*

I happened to casually mention this observation to a friend who suggested that my observation was influenced too heavily by my own personal library of photography books. He suggested that I extend my research to other items from the world of photographic publishing than those I've purchased based on my own likes and dislikes.

I took his advice and spent an entire day looking intensely through books at several of my local bookstores and at the Portland Public Library Main Branch. I was right to a certain degree. There were a few categories that I had missed in my survey of my own bookshelves. But the important point was — **I didn't miss that many categories!** It was fairly easy to add such classic subject matters as:

inner city ghettoscapes,  
 tattooed people (which I actually  
 think is covered in the category of  
 antisocial lifestyles),  
 rural nostalgia,  
 sexual fetish lifestyles,

and a whole subject category of really trite photography (including kittens with yarn, sunsets at the beach, smiling baby on a shag rug, back-lit sailboats on a glinting sea, and miscellaneous seagulls on pilings! *Aaarg!*)

I ask again, why do photographers limit themselves to such restricted areas of subject matter? I protest this trend. And frequently my protest takes the form of fascination and obsessive appreciation with the truly unique and different vision.

I'm spellbound by Wright Morris' photograph of silverware in a kitchen drawer. Did anyone do this before he did, and if so did he or she do it nearly so well? Paul Caponigro's *Running White Deer* is a marvelous photograph. So was Edward Weston's *Pepper No. 30* until everybody else started photographing vegetables, assuming that was Weston's genius. I'm fascinated by Ray McSavaney's photographs of the abandoned Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company manufacturing plant in Los Angeles. Look at Bruce Barnbaum's photographs of Antelope Canyon. I am also captivated by Ruth Bernhard's *Nude in a Box*, Atget's pictures of the storefronts of Paris, and the wonder-

ful photographs of mundane streetscapes by Lee Friedlander, Gary Winogrand, and Robert Adams.

What makes these photographers' work so wonderful is *their ability to see*. Let me ask your indulgence for a lengthy quotation from the 1960's Beat/Zen philosopher Alan Watts, who made the following observations about the function and role of an artist's unique vision in relationship to society.

"In painting, you cannot see a figure without a background. When you paint you have to *put in* some kind of a background. As time went on, painters began to put landscape into the background and in due course, Western painters began to be fascinated with the background. They said to the figure, *Move over*. Then there were *landscapes*. Of course, there were people who looked at them and weren't used to that kind of thing and said, *Well that's not what I call a painting!* But, in time they got used to it. So used to it, in fact, that in every national park you will find a place called *Inspiration Point!* Nowadays everybody wants a room with a

view. And when all the tourists from Kansas and Iowa get there they say, *Oh, it's just like a picture.*

“Copying nature was just the first phase of evolution. There was a further evolution beyond copying when the artists asked why they were limited to *copying* nature. They asked, *Why don't we just create works of nature without copying anything?* And abstract artists like Jackson Pollack would just drip paint on canvas.

“Now a lot of people thought, *Any child could do that*, and they made abstract paintings that nobody was interested in. They were just terrible! And some people took old typewriters and hit them with a sledge hammer a few times and mounted it on a cubic block of walnut and called it, you know, *Opus 14* or something. But this was completely phony.

“Pollack discovered that you had to be in a certain state of mind to achieve success with this work. He saw that there was something fundamentally different between a fine abstract painting and mere

mess. Well, there *is* a distinct difference between fine work and a mess. No one knows how they do it! Genius cannot be taught, but the difference does exist.

“So what is a mess to us or when made by us can be made into something significant in the right hands. Because the artist, you see, has the function of *teaching one to see*. Landscapes were just background until artists taught us to see them. Those monks who crossed the Alps in medieval times didn't look to the hills as beautiful examples of nature. They thought those mountains were a burden and would have liked to flatten them out into nice rolling plains that would be easier to traverse. Now we look at the Alps and say they are beautiful precisely because the artists have taught us to see them as beautiful.

“So, when spontaneous painting has become really understood by the great masses and people are walking down city streets, there will be a filthy old brick wall somewhere just covered with scraps of torn off posters and bird

droppings and scratches and they'll stop and look and say, *Oh, it's just like a picture!*"

Well, if Watts is right, the challenge he proposes is substantial. Not only is he suggesting that our role as artists is to see what other people don't see, but also to develop the means to teach that vision by making our vision so manifest and so accessible that our audience can see just as we do.

I began to appreciate the nature of this challenge when I started photographing my *Made of Steel* series of garages, machine shops, tool benches, and the old, greasy guys who call these places home. For years I struggled photographing such places with considerable lack of success. But every once in awhile, a single image would stand out and at least point the direction I needed to visually explore. Eventually, the ideas clicked, the project blossomed, and the vision became manifest in my work.

I knew that I'd accomplished something significant when a friend of mine, who also happens to be a photographer and therefore has, let us say, refined visualization skills, told me that he'd had a recent

experience involving a flat tire on his car. As the mechanic in the local garage fixed his tire, my friend found himself wandering around looking at the tools, the workbenches, the grease pits, and the mechanic with a new appreciation. *I had influenced the way he perceives the world.* Needless to say, I was thrilled when he related his experience to me and when he concluded his story with the comment, "In all the times I've been in garages and machine shops, I'd never really seen them until your photographs showed me what to look for."

One of my favorite quotes is from Nobel Prize winner Albert Szent-Gyorgyi:

"Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."

So why is it that still life photographs always have flower blossoms and fruit in them? Why hasn't anyone done a still life of shoes with cereal boxes? How come I never see photographs of children's toys? Why not photograph American living rooms, the inside of the refrigerator, junk mail, the oil stains in the driveway, the pile

of dead flies and spider webs in the window corners, or the ashes from the fireplace? Do we not photograph such trivialities around home because they are insignificant? *Or is it possible that these potential subject matters seem insignificant because no one has taught us yet how to see them significantly?*

If you're not familiar with his work, next time you're at the bookstore, take a peek at one of several books of photographs by Joseph Sudek. (Not to be confused with contemporary photographer Jan Sudek!) Joseph Sudek was a Czechoslovakian photographer working in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. He lived a very simple, even impoverished life. In spite of his spartan life, he made wonderful photographs of the things in his everyday life — his cluttered desk, a slice of cheese, an egg shell and some crumpled paper. Surely, Sudek's eggs and crumpled paper are insignificant subject matter, *but his photographs of them are not.*

One example is particularly worthy of note. Sudek did an entire series of extraordinary photographs of an insignificant and homely tree in his yard *from inside his kitchen window.* This is such an amazing series of photographs! The subtle changes

of light and weather and season make each photograph unique. But the magic of this series is even more apparent when seen *as a series* with the passage of time and the deepening sensitivity of the photographer himself.

There is a story told of a master Japanese poet lecturing to a group of American college students on the nature of *haiku* poetry. In the course of his lecture he was attempting to define certain technical terms. He said, "The term *yugen* is a very important term in Japanese poetry. *Yugen* is that feeling one gets when one sees a flock of geese fly off into the fog, and one can hear their honking still, but cannot see them as they disappear into the distance. The next term is *furyu*. *Furyu* is like when a man in a boat shouts to a man on the shore and even though they cannot see each other they can have a conversation while they drift past one another."

This sort of defining of terms proceeded for some time. After awhile one of the frustrated students raised his hand and said, "Please, I don't mean to be rude, but I don't understand. Can't you just give us straightforward definitions for these terms?" The Japanese master stood up, red-faced, pounded on the table with

some violence, and shouted at the top of his voice, "What's the matter with you Americans? Can't you *feel!*?"

Great photography is never about photography, it is about *life*. Ansel Adams' life was in Yosemite, and his photographs of Yosemite shine because of that. Edward Weston's life was so entwined with the California coast, and his photographs beautifully reflect that life. Wright Morris photographed his life on his boyhood home on the farm in Nebraska. Weegee photographed his life in New York City, Atget his shops and parks in the streets

and countryside of Paris, Sudek his eggs and cheese.

Could it be that the great photographers make their great images because they spring from their life, whereas the majority of "amateurs" fail to make great photographs because they are too busy trying to photograph someone else's life, someone else's landscape, someone else's experience? Perhaps instead of going out looking for subject matter, we should simply try to clearly see our life **as it is** and find the images of significance that surround us.



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LensWork Publishing  
909 Third Street  
Anacortes, WA 98221-1502 U.S.A.

**USA TOLL FREE 1-800-659-2130**

Voice 360-588-1343 FAX 503-905-6111

Email [editor@lenswork.com](mailto:editor@lenswork.com)

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