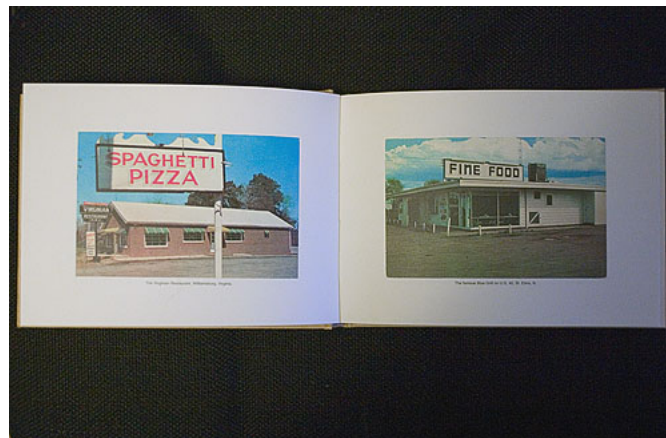


Boring Photographs

"Eschew cliché." [<http://www.luminous-landscape.com/columns/sm-03-06-01.shtml>] -- Michael Johnston

One of the funniest photography-related books I've come across in the past few years is a very small, brown, plain-looking volume from Phaidon. It's called "Boring Postcards." Somehow, I think the German title, "Langweilige Postkarten" is even more evocative. It's a collection of meticulously grouped, carefully reproduced... boring postcards. Yet the parade of gas stations, diners, shopping malls, motorways, airports, and other extremely un-photogenic subjects often photographed without even a modicum of ambition, when presented as a collection, is incredibly funny.



A boring photograph of Boring Postcards. How's that for conceptual art? The captions read "The Virginian Restaurant, Williamsburg, Virginia," and "The famous Blue Grill on U.S. 40, St. Elmo, Ill." (No, it isn't a copyright violation; it's a "derivative work." Besides which, the copyright on the postcards has expired, and the book itself doesn't even have a copyright notice.)

However, most boring photographs wouldn't make much of a book, even if put together like this. They're simply too boring. So boring that even a heavy coating of ironic publishing work wouldn't give enough context to make them interesting.

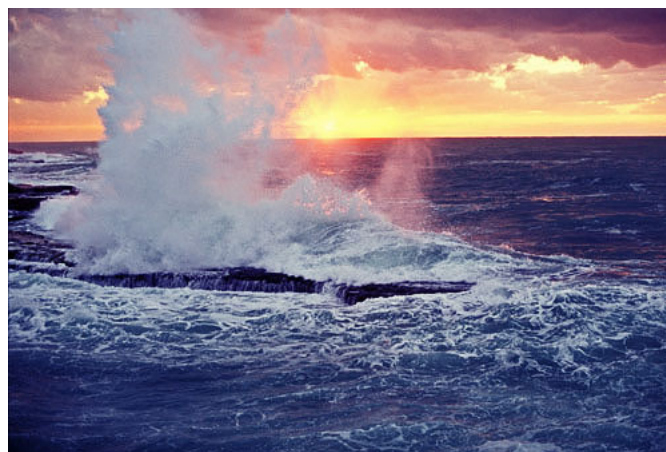
Anatomy of a Boring Photograph

Boring photographs aren't what you might first think. Album photos aren't boring. On the contrary, they're among the most interesting photographs to look at, especially if the album belongs to you or someone you know. There's nothing quite like turning the pages of an album, as the pictures get yellower and more faded with each visit. A photo album is memory condensed: like the quipu of the Incas, only explicit if the human memory is present to fill in the blanks, but mysteriously evocative even if it isn't. I would far sooner page through anyone's family album than go to an exhibition full of pretentious, large... boring photographs.



Boring photographs? Not on your life! These are my friends you're talking about. And me. Half-covered by the page is Kossu and Outi getting married, on the page to the left in the silly sneakers and funny hat is me, probably on one of my jaunts to St. Petersburg, drinking two cans of Nevskoe beer at once to save time (ah, those were the days), and to the right are Andy, Sanna, Jarmo, and me. Andy's my best friend; he's getting married soon and I'll be off to Montana for the occasion.

Photography straddles the divide between art and utility. Most photographs are strictly utilitarian -- whoever produced the image had some pretty specific purpose in mind when shooting it, whether it was to preserve a memory, to document a news story, or to sell toothpaste. These kinds of photographs are rarely really boring. They can't afford to be, or they wouldn't serve their purpose. Boring photography thrives in the realm of so-called "fine art" photography -- that is, photography whose primary reason for being is existence as an object in itself. "Dinge an sich [<http://www.anschaulich.de/wboard/Wirklichkeit/messages/885.html>]," as the folks who gave us Langweilige Postkarten would helpfully add.

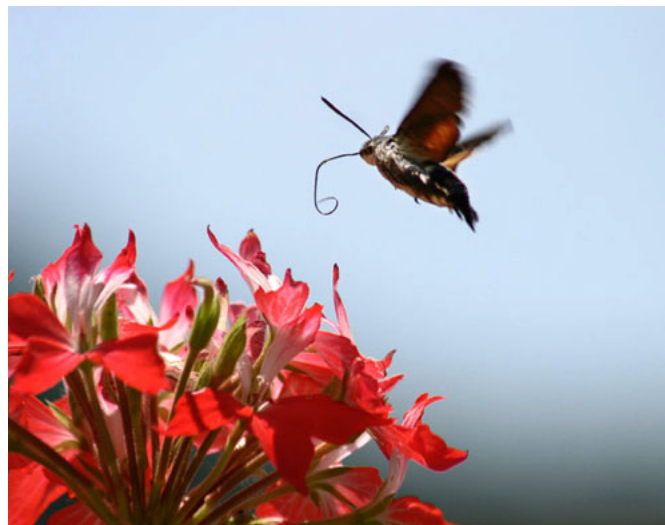


Sunset, wave breaking on the rocks, lowering clouds, what else do you need? No mountains, though.

Something horrible tends to happen to people when they suddenly realize that the camera they hold can produce things that are pretty in and of themselves. They suddenly stop making interesting pictures -- the pictures that fill their albums, tell stories, evoke emotions, preserve memories. They go into a rictus of

squeezing out endless flower macros and portraits of ducks. Eventually, as they progress in what they think of the art of photography, they may graduate to gauzy soft-focus portraits of simpering women (clothing optional), black-and-white figure studies of carefully sanitized, moodily lit nudes with perfect bodies on a black backdrop, eagles taking wing in zoos or wildlife sanctuaries, motorbikes speeding through the curves on a track, "golden hour" landscapes with mountains and water, or macros of bugs. Eventually some of them may realize the futility of it all and go into a rebellious mode and shoot off an angry series of poorly exposed grainy and blurry pictures of nothing in particular, or dress the simpering ladies in vinyl and slather lots of make-up on them and call it "fetish photography." Log on to Photosig [<http://www.photosig.com/>] and you're guaranteed to see a ton of these pictures on both the "Featured Photos" and "Photos" page. And, of course, open up any DPReview forum, and it's virtually certain that there'll be at least one thread with flower macros on the first page. Bubble gum for the eyes.

I just took a peek: the Featured Photos page had four gauzy simpering ladies, including one in a wedding dress, one moodily lit nude, two golden-hour mountain landscapes, one duck (in a wildlife sanctuary to boot), one bug macro (with two bugs), one rally car barreling down the track (no motorbikes, though), and one somewhat blurry photo of nothing in particular. Also one grimacing kid that would look pretty interesting in an album, two storm landscapes... and one actually pretty nice scene of a bookshop with a lady sunken in thought and interesting light coming through the window.



A bug and a flower in the same frame, oh my!

Boredom And More Cameras

There's nothing actually wrong with shooting boring photographs. It can even be fun; the technical challenge does make the process of shooting them interesting (at least for a while), and there's always the satisfaction of seeing through a conjuring trick -- being able to look at other people's boring photographs and going, "Ah-ha! I know how he did that one!" However, in the long run it gets deeply unfulfilling.

Most amateur photographers appear to be gearheads to a greater or lesser extent. I know a few who aren't, who make do with the same beat-up old Nikon and a single lens for years and years. I'd very much like to think of myself as falling into that category, but alas, it is not to be -- I'm as gear-headed as they come. I'd spend all my disposable income on cameras, if I didn't have a wife to remind me that there are other things in life that are more important. The question is, why?

I believe that an underlying reason is the unconscious dissatisfaction that comes with stopping to pursue a

hobby for yourself and starting to pursue it for others. No matter how many flower macros or gauzy young ladies you shoot, after the initial kick you got from getting it exactly as sharp or gauzy or simpering as you intended, you end up looking at them and feeling vaguely empty inside. So, the natural impulse is to fill that void by buying some more of the delectable gear that's being offered to us from all directions.

What shall we use to fill the empty spaces Where the waves of hunger roar? Shall we set out across this sea of faces In search of more and more applause? Shall we buy a new guitar? Shall we drive a more powerful car?
From "Empty Spaces," by Roger Waters

The nasty thing about buying more cameras (or lenses, or lights, or whatever) is that it *works*. In the short term, anyway. When you buy a new toy, you play with it. As you play with it, you go out and shoot pictures. Since it's different than your old toys, you do things differently, and get some stuff that doesn't leave you feeling all empty inside. Then you start thinking of other people again, get back in a rut, and start churning out more flower macros and gauzy ladies, and the emptiness inside starts building up again, and so you start lusting after yet some other piece of equipment, and then one day your pocketbook is thick enough or you simply can't restrain your horniness and go buy it, and then you get another kick which makes it that much easier to succumb the next time. Somewhere along the road the emptiness might even get transmuted into bitterness, and you'll start making snide comments about blurry artsy pictures, or poorly-focused technically bad pictures, or people with the wrong brand of camera.

And all along, more flower macros and gauzy ladies.



A poorly exposed grainy and blurry picture of nothing much in particular. Well, unless cracked slabs of concrete count. Perhaps if I titled it "Concrete Abstract," it could be an allegorical depiction of urban decay and the long walk home...

Eventually you might think "fuck it!" and start producing blurry, grainy, ugly pictures of nothing in particular, and get a momentary kick out of knocking over all the idols you so painstakingly built, until you realize that you're only following *another* set of conventions, in order to please *another* crowd, only this time it's a smaller crowd who likes to wear black, smoke a lot, and sit around in cafés. While all this time the little creative you that got you into the hobby in the first place whimpers in some dank, dusty, cobwebby corner of your soul, neglected and forgotten, with no way of making itself hear except through that feeling of emptiness, the silence that you so desperately want to drown out by shutter-clicks and megapixels and fluorite lens elements and A3+ sized printers and Alien Bees and beat-up old Leicas.

Why Do We Bother?

The big one. The question that most of us will end up facing, sooner or later, perhaps after the emptiness

strings itself out into a needlepoint of frustration disguised as anger, that night when we end up drinking too much and make a little bonfire of all our negs or CD's or whatever we use to store our precious "work." Why? Why do we spend such an inordinate amount of time and effort in thinking about cameras, discussing cameras, operating cameras, buying cameras, selling cameras? What was it that got us into photography in the first place? Usually the reasons weren't stated or consciously defined; more often than not they're forgotten.

My first experience of photography as something in itself was when I was about ten and my father made some prints off a black-and-white film he'd shot on a trip to America. There were killer whales in those pictures. I was with him in the darkroom, and watched those bold black and white shapes slowly fade into view. I still remember the fascination, and the feeling that I've *got* to learn that.



I was twelve when I shot this one. We were on a class outing, staying at a farm. I'd borrowed my parents' Minolta, and took photos like mad. The right lens on my glasses had to be replaced because the viewfinder had scratched it so badly I couldn't see through it. Then I spent one entire weekend printing, because I'd sold prints for the whole class, at some 25 cents a pop. That's my classmate Tommi in the picture, and the girl's name is Outi... or is it? Can't tell from the picture; that name just popped into my head. Maybe the negs are still somewhere; this is a photo of a photo...

In the beginning, photography is instinctual. Some are so talented that that's all they'll ever need; that, and practice. The rest of us will eventually start to work consciously on what we're doing, whether it's through attention to composition through "rules," dissecting the work of photographers we admire, setting ourselves assignments ("one photo a day, every day, with one lens and one type of film; no more, no less"), joining camera clubs, or submitting our work to Photosig. All of this does exert a pull towards blandness. Most of us succumb to it at one point or another. Some are never released from the beguiling clutches of flower macros and gauzy ladies. Yet others turn what started out as a passion into a profession, and start shooting flower macros and gauzy ladies for money, for customers equally imprisoned by the invisible chains of convention. And with every shutter click, that little character retreats further into the cobwebby recesses of the soul.

Yet a quite a few manage to shake it off, eventually. They get to the point where they ask themselves the big question. Then they either find some kind of answer and start making interesting pictures again, give up photography altogether, or find inspiration in looking for it.

Asking the question is the key; the answers don't really matter in the end.

The Art Form For The Rest Of Us

Very few of us have the capability to put pen to paper and produce anything that's remotely interesting to look at. My sister has it. Her boyfriend has it even more. This guy from Australia, Hin Chua, [<http://www.pbase.com/hinius/profile>] has it in gobs. A spark from the fire of Prometheus burns brightly in them. They don't need photography, although they actually happen to be pretty damn good at it.

For genuine, true-blue artists, photography is a medium among other media. For the rest, it is one of the few ways in which we can produce objects of artistic value. Even pure accident will occasionally produce a photographically interesting image, and the techniques involved are so simple that a few days to a week of practice and instruction is enough to acquire the basic competence to produce images with intention. Even that level of technical competence is purely optional -- with modern cameras, simply pointing and clicking can produce art that is every bit as valuable as a David painstakingly chipped out of a block of marble.

Photography is the art form that's best suited for us uncreative people. It alone of the arts produces its artifacts through a direct, physical connection with the external world -- and the world is inherently interesting. A photographer does not need to be a creative genius in order to produce interesting or artistically valuable objects -- he merely needs to notice what is interesting in the world. What he lacks in genius, his subjects can provide. All that you need to get interesting photographs is to go out into the world and get them.



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