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The Image of Time

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On Photography

By TEJU COLE



Coleman's Cafe in Greensboro, Ala., as photographed by William Christenberry in 1967.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

Sometime in 1967, William Christenberry made a photograph of Coleman's Cafe in Greensboro, Ala. It is a straightforward frontal shot of a clapboard building made of weathered wood. The building has a porch with four posts. Above the porch, a white board with faded lettering reads, "Coleman's Cafe," and above that is a round Coca-Cola sign. Christenberry returned to photograph this building every year for almost three decades. By the time he shot the same building again in 1971, the sign had been changed — the establishment's name and the Coca-Cola sign now appeared in a single board — and one of the vertical posts on the porch was gone. By 1978, the roof was in disrepair, and the building had been painted red. By 1980, the missing post had been replaced with a slender plank, but the sign was gone.



Coleman's Cafe in Greensboro, Ala., in 1971.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

Christenberry, who died last year, was born in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in 1936, and though he later moved to Washington, D.C., where he lived for decades, his work centered on yearly returns to Alabama. Some of his photographs were stand-alone shots of a given subject. But he often created series by returning to the same sites, whose appearances were subtly inflected from year to year by the cycle of the seasons, or fundamentally altered, either by neglect or renovation.

Christenberry focused on those aspects of the landscape that evoked vernacular building styles, especially in Hale County, where he spent much of his childhood. Walker Evans's influence is apparent: a scrupulous realism with no trace of irony. Christenberry was drawn to shacks, simple churches, barns and makeshift buildings, but also to the red dust and wild vegetation of the region, especially the kudzu that grew ferociously on the roadsides and gradually reclaimed whatever was left undefended.



Coleman's Cafe in Greensboro, Ala., in 1980.

WILLIAM CHRISTENBERRY

Each element in a landscape has its own history. Christenberry appointed himself historian of a number of sites in Hale County, not because they were of great importance (they almost never were) but because they called out to him and elicited from him a sense of responsibility. His photographs collectively showed something of the passage of time in his corner of the American South.

The meaning of a photograph changes when it is set next to another to which it is related. Usually, photographs in a series depict different subjects, so they vary from one another in obvious ways: The lens of the camera has been pointed at something else and the resulting image solves a different visual problem. A photo essay that contains, say, eight images is typically expected to present us with eight different scenes. The photographs might have been made at different times, but they don't interfere with one another and might as well have been shot simultaneously. This is true even in the case of taxonomic or typological photographs like those made by Bernd and Hilla Becher, in which the "subject" changes in undramatic ways but in which the point is the group and not the single image. Something else is happening in series like Christenberry's of rural and small-town Alabama: What is different is not the subject but the time it was photographed. Looking at such a series confirms that when you make one photograph and, some time later, make another of the same thing, what is inside the frame changes. With the passage of time, you no longer have "the same thing."



All photos: Cesena, Fiume, July 2007.
GUIDO GUIDI

Time is photography's illusion. Almost every photograph appears instantaneous. But of course, there's no such thing as "instantaneous": All fragments of time have a length. In a photograph, the time during which the light is refracted by the lens, enters the aperture and is allowed to rest on the photosensitive surface could be 1/125th of a second, one-eighth of a second, half a second, a whole minute, much more or much less. What is intriguing about a practice like Christenberry's is that it employs time elsewhere in the photograph too: as a source of narrative. His use of intervals — intervals that, in his case, can last a year or more — to construct a series is related to the approach taken by the Italian photographer Guido Guidi.

Guidi's main subject is the terrain of postindustrial Northern Italy. In 2007, he made a photograph of the Savio River, which flows through his home city, Cesena. In the photograph, the river is flat and muddy and seems to be passing under a bridge, whose brick wall we can see on one side. The photo was taken on a bright day, with some sections of both the river and the bridge in the full glare of the sun, and other sections in shadow. The shadow of the bridge over the water is angled, so that the bright section looks like an arrowhead. But there's a second photograph, of pretty much the same scene, with a similarly muted color scheme, except that the bright section is now larger. And it turns out there's a third photograph as well. Again, the scene is the same, but the arrowhead is even larger. We surmise that the three photographs were taken in a single afternoon, as the sun moved across the surface of this unremarkable stretch of the Savio River. Something about the serenity of this movement, or at least our apprehension of the photographer's loving patience in capturing it, is beautiful, more beautiful than any single photograph in the series.



Untitled.
ZOE LEONARD / HAUSER & WIRTH

The photos I've been describing have in common an affective approach to landscape. In this way they are different from other timed photographic studies, like Eadweard Muybridge's pioneering studies of human and animal movement or Harold Edgerton's strobe-lit experiments. Closer in concept is Zoe Leonard's untitled four-photograph work, made up of repeated depictions of a pair of trees in a New York housing complex. Leonard noticed how plastic bags, floating up on the wind, had become snagged on the branches of the trees, and how the number of bags would vary over time. In the course of several months, she made photographs of the trees, with four or five or a dozen bags hanging from them.

Leonard's project, like Christenberry's and Guidi's, implies physical return. Between one exposure and the next, time passes, life goes on and the artist re-encounters his or her altered subject. Guidi's camera, set on a tripod, captures a scene with some of its elements exactly repeated. But in Christenberry's and Leonard's work, there's an imprecision in the placement of the camera, an imprecision both natural and welcome that gives us easy spot-the-difference variations between one photo and the next. This inexactness of framing helps us understand that what makes these images valuable is not the differences among them, but the way a pair of stills can, simply and elegantly, pin down a central concern of human life: the passage of time.



Seaford Head, 1999, and Seaford Head, 2000.
JEM SOUTHAM / ROBERT MANN GALLERY

Jem Southam, an English photographer whose projects also unfold over many years, takes a similar approach. Southam often works on rockfalls and landslides, registering significant changes on cliffs and coasts in England and France. But some works in his series also record the barely perceptible movement of eroded material down a slope, the process geologists term “creep.” The intervals between Southam’s gorgeous large-format photographs allow for both radical changes and subdued ones, illustrating that the earth has a different sense of time than we do. Why does Southam revisit the cliffs of East Sussex? What drew Zoe Leonard to Manhattan’s Avenue A? Why did William Christenberry keep returning to Hale County? What gives Guido Guidi faith in Cesena? I can’t help sensing in these works, which photographically verify the passing hours or days or years, a quiet gratitude about the simple fact of return.

After a recent spell of travel, I returned home to Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where I have lived for the past nine years. I began to take photographs of the park, not for the first time, but for the first time in an attentive way. The naturalist John Muir once wrote, “Most people are *on* the world, not in it.” I went back to the same sections, day after day, the same leaf-littered stretch of lawn, the same work site, the same stands of trees. I went in different weather conditions, in snow and rain and bright sunshine, and I went at different times of day. Shooting roll after roll, I began to accumulate a highly personal composite image of the park.

The seasons turned. The trees changed radically or not at all. At a time when politics made the flow of time feel hectic, shooting in the park slowed me down, and using film slowed me down further. I was looking at foliage in green and an infinity of browns, as well as the fine shock of dazzling white after a blizzard, the silvery grays after rain. In contrast to my usual approach to photography — selecting single images from shooting done far away from home — the photos from Sunset Park made me more inclined to consider unspectacular images part of the work. That work continues. On any given day, I pick up a camera and a roll or two of film and walk to a small grove in a small park in Brooklyn. The grove is there waiting, and I am always grateful at the reunion.

Teju Cole is the magazine’s photography critic and the author, most recently, of the essay collection “Known and Strange Things.”

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