

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

Perfect and Unrehearsed

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Three boys in Liberia. Martin Munkacsí/Howard Greenberg Gallery

By Teju Cole

Nov. 11, 2015

“I couldn’t believe such a thing could be caught with the camera. I said, ‘Damn it,’ took my camera and went out into the street.” This was Henri Cartier-Bresson’s dazzled and vexed reaction to Martin Munkacsí’s photograph of boys running into the surf in Liberia. He saw it in 1932: the dark, sinuous bodies of three African boys — their rhyming legs at the place where sea meets land; their interweaving arms dialed to varying heights; their interlocking limbs creating abstract shapes; and the grace note, on the left side, of a single silhouetted arm. This image, Cartier-Bresson said, inspired his own approach, showing him that “photography could reach eternity through the moment.”

Cartier-Bresson’s “The Decisive Moment,” published in 1952, went on to become one of the most influential photography books ever made (a meticulous facsimile of the original was reissued last year by Steidl). Here are Cartier-Bresson’s best and most famous pictures: a cyclist zipping like a tangent past a spiral staircase in Hyères, children playing in a ruined precinct in Seville, Sunday picnickers on the banks of the Marne. Cartier-Bresson writes in the book’s foreword that the goal of these pictures was “a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression.” In that phrase “precise organization” there’s a quality of intention that agrees with the English title, the idea of the decisive moment. But the book’s original, French title was “Images à la Sauvette,” images taken on the sly. It is not quite as catchy, but it suggests a different truth about Cartier-Bresson’s work.





Suzhou Creek. Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Alex Webb, who is a member of Magnum Photos, co-founded by Cartier-Bresson, put it to me this way: “The humility of [‘Images à la Sauvette’] — which suggests the uncertainty and mystery of collaborating with the world as a street photographer — seems more in the spirit of Cartier-Bresson’s photography. As he once said, ‘It is the photo that takes you.’” To limit Cartier-Bresson’s photos to just a single moment misses the point. As Webb told me, Cartier-Bresson allowed him to see that there are “often multiple potential moments to discover in many situations — and that different photographers will find different moments.”

There’s no single right answer, just as there’s no photographic formula. Each successful picture taken on the sly by Cartier-Bresson was one original solution to a set of circumstances he was encountering for the first time. Consider, for instance, a lesser-known photograph he made in Shanghai’s Suzhou Creek in 1949. The piles of bundled wood, the fanned-out ends of the poles, the standing figures, the curved prows of the canoes: Each element contributes to the kaleidoscopic coherence of the image. The long shafts of the poles create new rectangles inside the larger one that frames the picture. These smaller rectangles are close to square in their dimensions (squares tilted on their axes). Were a rectangle sketched around the pensive figure in the foreground, it, too, would approximate a square. The feeling of harmony in many photographs by Cartier-Bresson, this one included, comes in part from this ability to see and capture a scene’s native repetitions of shape or gesture.

Cartier-Bresson’s oeuvre, his reportorial as well as aesthetic achievements, laid the ground for future photojournalists. Maggie Steber, for instance, credits him with giving her a way to think about style, content and construction. But then, as any mature artist must, she moved into her own visual language. In her photograph of a funeral in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in 1987, an exquisitely balanced composition is further strengthened by the judicious color: light blue, dark blue and brown. The main mourner’s gesture, his powerful arms outstretched, echoes that of the figure of Christ on the cross behind him.



A young Haitian man grieving at the funeral of his mother in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Maggie Steber/Redux

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The picture's structure is sustained by intersecting lines. The man's head and left arm form a diagonal; a rectangle set off from this diagonal would contain the main action of the photograph. In the background are other crosses. Even the streetlamp is a half-finished cross. These crosses are like individual instruments taking up a musical theme. A roof at the left emphasizes the main diagonal and a glance from the second most prominent man in the picture, which parallels it. The pale-shirted shoulders from which the dark-suited mourner emerges form a radiating arrangement, and the bent elbows to the left and right are like parentheses around this group of helpers.

Beginning photographers are often tempted to reduce photography to rigid rules. The rule of thirds — thinking of the picture plane in terms of a grid made of three equal vertical and three equal horizontal divisions, with the points of interest placed at the intersections of these lines — is a common starting point. More sophisticated is the golden ratio (two quantities are said to be in a golden ratio if the ratio of the larger to the smaller is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger). Imagine a triptych in which the center is about 0.618 as wide as each of the wings. Because this ratio is often found in nature, it is credited as the mathematical logic behind many efficient and visually pleasing phenomena: certain flower petals, or mollusk shells, or spiral galaxies. These codes can be helpful for looking. But the reality is that there is usually a much more improvisatory and flexible mathematical order at play in a successful photograph.

A bright afternoon in 1986. Alex Webb is on the streets of Bombardopolis, a town in northwestern Haiti. That afternoon is long gone now, but a photograph Webb made that day remains. A woman stands in a blue frock and a red head scarf. An enormous cigarette floating next to her face turns out to be in the mouth of a man in deep shadow in the foreground. In the middle distance are a donkey's ears, and little else of the donkey. Farther back is a boy, neatly contained in the frame created by a bamboo pole on one side and a painted wall on the other. He is in silhouette, and he appears to be looking at the photographer (and therefore at us, who share the photographer's view). There are other people in the picture: a man in profile on the left; another little boy, only his head visible, peeking just below the silhouetted boy; a woman in a patterned red-and-blue cloth standing in a doorway with her back to us. The plaster has flaked off the wall on the right to reveal a shape as pointed and angular as the donkey's ears.



Bombardopolis, Haiti. Alex Webb/Magnum Photos

In Steber's picture of the funeral, there is a miraculous unity of action. She described to me how it came about: "Like an orchestra playing a dramatic symphony, everything crescendoed at the same time. The dead woman's son, without warning, suddenly rose up in anguish in the painful last cry of a son saying goodbye forever to his mother, and just as the last rays of sun fell on his face." The opposite is true in Webb's picture. There is no dramatic highlight; no one interacts with or even looks at anyone else. The only

communicative glance is from the two boys, outward, toward us. And yet the anomie of an afternoon in the 1980s in a small, hot Haitian town is given, in this photograph, uncanny, indelible and exact form.

Webb's is perhaps not a picture Cartier-Bresson would have liked very much, as he was skeptical of color and strong shadows. But for Webb, everything is fair game: color, shadows, a silhouette, a rock, a wall, a cigarette, a donkey's ears, a saddle, a signboard, a hand here, a head there. Despite this freedom, everything is in its right place. Notice the repetition of an elongated rectangle: the door, the doorway, the vertical sections of wall, the lower edge of the window. Then there are the implied polygons around key figures: the silhouetted boy, the woman in the red scarf, the donkey's ears. The same elongated rectangle, or at least one related to it by ratio, appears in various sizes and in various disguises in free geometric play throughout the picture plane.

The success of certain pictures — pictures that make the viewer say, "Damn it," and wonder how such things are possible — comes from a combination of tutored intuition and good luck. Could Munkacs, Cartier-Bresson, Steber or Webb have considered some matters of pictorial complexity at the moment they made their pictures? No question about it. But could they have seen every element at the moment they pressed the shutter? Impossible. The photographer has to be there to begin with, tuned in and tuned up, active, asking a family for permission to attend a funeral in Port-au-Prince, following a man and a donkey down the road in Bombardopolis. The rest is fate.

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A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 15, 2015, Page 22 of the Sunday Magazine. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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