The New Color: The Return of Black-and-White

CHARLOTTE COTTON

The way I look at and think about black-and-white photography has shifted profoundly since the early 2000s. The words to describe my changing perspective are on the tip of my tongue. Let me set the scene for you.

I was living in London, researching a book about contemporary art photography and, given the climate of the time, looking mainly at color and increasingly larger-sized photographs. I was working as a curator for a national collection of photography, curating exhibitions on the history of photography for a dedicated photo gallery, and thrilled that we were going to be a tour venue for the Diane Arbus exhibition. Over at the Tate Modern, their first exhibition dedicated to photography, *Cruel and Tender*, had opened up a series of debates about the nature and genealogy of contemporary photography. New market heights for photography both old and new were just beginning to be set—and readily broken.

I had doubts, of course, about photography's moment in art's spotlight. For instance, it was obvious that photography was undergoing a physical face-lift to meet the demands of sitting alongside painting and sculpture in vast art centers and at international fairs; the predominance of big digital C-prints, laminated behind plexi, in small editions, was establishing itself. The hyperbolic, carefully controlled, museum- and gallery-specific versions of photography, in which every prop and gesture can be attributed to the artist's direction, have been the most pronounced arrivals in the art world. If you are, like me, schooled in the magic of photography's willful embrace of luck, mistakes, and happenstance, you view the art world's partial endorsement of this bastard form with some suspicion. I don't mean to deride the awe-inspiring creativity of a handful of artists who showed us that photography was a supremely capable and elastic art medium and were honored with monolithic, monographic exhibitions. I mean to indicate that their ascendance into the center of art practice does not necessarily herald the acceptance or understanding of photography's broad creative terrain as a whole.

Since the mid-1990s, it has not been easy to generate popular interest in the small, black-and-white prints that pseudo-simulate human vision and capture the quotidian miracles that seemingly inundated photographers in the previous century. In an era where exhibition visitors' eyes have become used to the big, colorful spectacle of contemporary art photography, black-and-white photography—especially in 35mm format and in a series—has not offered the style or production values required to sustain clear legibility. This is not to trumpet the cultural extinction of black-and-white photography—it's not that dire. Truly great photographs (frequently large or medium format) by Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans, or Edward Weston, and recent exhibitions of tiny, delectable prints by André Kertész and Henri Cartier-Bresson continue to throw a powerful sotto voce punch within visual culture and the exhibition experience of photography. But it is definitely more hit-and-miss for a photographer working in black-and-white to anticipate whether or not the full meaning and contemporary relevance of their imagery will be understood in light of color art photography's dominance. At the beginning of this millennium, I found it difficult to keep my confidence that photography's monochrome history continued to exert a strong influence on the way we see. At least that you could no longer take as a given that black-and-white was necessarily influential in art school discourses or read by exhibition-goers as anything more than an historic and once-important art form. The last generation of practitioners and thinkers who were seduced by photography via the clearly authored monochrome work of, say, Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, or Lee Friedlander, were mainly born in the 1950s. Many of my students and the younger artists I have conversed with in the past decade made a very select edit from the medium's history to fuel their own creativity—a history that tends to privilege Cindy Sherman and the godfathers of color-photography-as-art, William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, allowing for the occasional reference to the lineage of proto-artists-using-photography, including Man Ray and Ed Ruscha. The monochromatic contributions of Bernd and Hilla Becher are perhaps seen as unrepeatable, but their demonstration of just how disciplined and controlled a medium photography can be has been profoundly felt. I'm not suggesting that all photographers need to have an encyclopedic history, but as a writer and thinker about photography, I find it is very telling to test out what artists keep relevant and in contemporary circulation.

On top of this, the early 2000s were marked by a wide range of reactions to the usurping of analog techniques by digital technologies. The commercial image-making industries were in the process of abandoning photographic film and had long embraced the controlling and—occasionally—creative power of digital retouching. Commercial magazines were leaving film behind, shifting over to computer-to-plate printing processes. As of now, they have already begun to move away from the printed page and the still image in favor of the new commercial frontier of the Internet, home of the blip and the B-roll. At the same time, art schools and photography labs were slow to make the transition from film and enlargers to inkjet or LightJet printers. The fear factor was high that photographic papers, especially gelatin-silver, would be extinct before the analog-minded had worked out their digital alternatives. While that anxiety seems to have been temporarily held at bay, color art photography has almost entirely acquiesced to the hybridized processes of Lambda or LightJet printing that fuse digital image files with traditional, chemically reactive C-print paper. Digital "capture" is only now beginning to make inroads into creative practice and, in my experience, this is only the second year in which artists have talked to me about digital capture cameras as being of good enough quality and cost effective in the long run. I can see that pragmatics and creativity—the two key ingredients for true art photography—are healthily at play. But we are held back from fully and creatively exploring the various languages of digital photography so long as we remain in the seductive grip of the large, digitally sharpened, and lushly enhanced C-print, which becomes ever more convincing as the print type by which we judge all others, while we begin to forget the pleasure of an entirely analog print—just as most of us can no longer remember the hiss of vinyl records. With an art market that remains suspicious of the more economic and likely artist-made inkjet print, the potential for new color languages for photography are slow to emerge. A career-oriented art photographer (and maybe this is the first generation of artists who can consider it a "career") sticks very close to the now well-traveled path of contemporary color photography's aesthetic homage and partial remembrance of, for example, gorgeous Kodachrome, or the beam of an enlarger. In a career-oriented era, perhaps this strategy is wiser than trying to beat a path through the resistance to presenting imagery in other ways and forms that actually respond to the potential of digitization. Of course I feel bemused at why a nascent art photographer would be so openly conservative as to adhere to apparent conventions, and at my most pessimistic, I wonder if there's too much "trying-to-be-like" Eggleston, Shore, et al., and too little "creative-departure-from" the stellar standards that they have set.

I am sure I'm not alone in beginning to think that the more complex, messy, unfashionable, and broad territory of black-and-white photography is where we are going to find some of the grist to the mill in photography's substantive and longer-term positioning within art. Established, darkroom-trial-and-error-loving photographers are stockpiling their preferred papers and film, and younger practitioners are beginning the experimentation of finding digital alternatives, replete with all the inherent irony of converting chromatic digital to monochrome. In and of itself, this kind of contradictory momentum will create important discourse while also continuing to link the various value systems for photography (including amateur and professional practice) with artists' critique of their medium. Outside of the most financially and technologically privileged families and high schools, analog black-and-white photography is still a key access route into seeing and thinking photographically. While we had the hiatus in the early 2000s for the "give the (poor) kids disposable (analog) cameras" projects, black-and-white photography still looks like the most cost-effective method for an inspirational teacher to make visual literacy a necessary part of a child's expression and education. The techno-friendly, leisure time-rich amateur photographer successfully crafts the ever-nostalgic, formally perfected, black-and-white masterwork, by digital means. Epson and other manufacturers are on the verge of effectively (if not sentimentally) replacing Ilford and other favored gelatin-silver papers by offering highly technical alternatives that have a rich black-and-white tonality and even mimic the surfaces of gelatin-silver papers. We have also seen the refreshed relevance of monochrome digital fashion and lifestyle photography, something that had been a big commercial no-no in the 1990s. Perhaps the pungent and effective double act of sex and violence that had been slickly conveyed by the heavily retouched fashion imagery of the late 1990s was more dangerous, unpalatable and un-commissionable in post-9/11 austerity. The classic, neo-conservative production values of recent studio-based monochrome might actually be another point where black-and-white's reprieve from potential cultural extinction seems to be felt. It's here in this mix of agendas and uses of black-and-white photography that I think we have the ingredients for cognizant, challenging photography.

One of the most important factors here is our visual recognition that the act of making and defining photographic practice in print form is increasingly nostalgic, and perhaps that calls for an aesthetics of nostalgia. Tacita Dean's book, *Floh*, made with Martyn Ridgewell in 2001, was the first conscious experience I had of substantially enjoying a new nostalgia factor in photography. It was the moment of revelation for me that digital technology was pervasive, representing a fundamental shift that affected all photography—analog as well as digital, old as well as new. *Floh* is a eulogy: to the magic, random, and physical experience of photography as found (literally) in Dean's photographs from flea markets. My first viewing of *Floh* felt like a ray of hope, that the alchemic values accorded to analog photography could still be interpreted and represented in a profoundly meaningful way. *Floh* gave me back a self-consciousness in the act of looking at photographic prints. I found myself enjoying their formal values as one would an ancient artifact: oblivious to the original function, just taking pleasure in its physicality and survival through time. And perhaps this way of looking was something to be embraced as well as acknowledged. Reveling in the auratic propensity of monochrome photographic thinking is perhaps not an unreconstructed Modernist impulse any longer, but rather a true reaction to the axis shift in the way we look at photography in light of digital.

As my antenna for photography undergoes a now conscious shift, I've begun to hone in on contemporary bodies of work that resonate with this new understanding. I can't speak for others, but my curatorial practice often works in this way: an idea takes hold of me and, magically, I realize that its manifestations are already there and all around me, if only I had chosen to notice. It is, for me, the most enriching stage of being with photography—before the lockdown and paperwork of turning an idea into a piece of writing, an event, or an exhibition. It is a most rewarding stage, to feel one's sensibility being drawn into new experiences.

After my initial epiphany, the next prompt for my timely review of the values that I applied to black-and-white photography came in looking at Susan Lipper's *Trip*. Her fictional version of the American road trip was a signpost to me as to how relevant a contemporary black-and-white vision could be. Somehow, Lipper managed to combine the classic Robert Frank-ian pictures-just-waiting-to-happen with the tangible sense of her own photographic discovery. Lipper's photographs aren't ironic—they may have a dry wit at times, but *Trip* doesn't convey an overbearing sense of pastiche or appropriation of the classic pictures we already know, nor an adolescent joy of making a convincing 'good' picture. *Trip* is like Collier Schorr's most recent book *Forest and Fields Volume 1*, showing how an artist can revive photographic heritage and make it fresh. In both books, the artists' astute, creative, and willful use of the medium of monochrome at the moment of its perceived obsolescence feels incendiary. So, too, is the comment upon warfare by An-My Lê, which utilizes the aesthetics and rhetoric of the earliest war photography by Roger Fenton at the Crimean War or the graphic portrayal of America's Civil War by George Barnard. In her *Small Wars* series, An-My Lê's use of a cumbersome and slow photographic practice at the sites of America's reenactments of its war in Vietnam captures the aestheticization and censorship of warfare, made all the more poignant by the way in which the Abu Ghraib digital snaps were later burned into our retinas.

I'm not suggesting that these artists are primarily undertaking acts of rethinking history; these are not merely descriptions of how to reinterpret the language of black-and-white photography just when the moment in photography's journey seems to be paved with color LightJet prints. Their practice offers creative, in-process solutions to the potential quagmire in photography-as-contemporary-art's current color manifestations, and also to our dislocation from the pertinence that photography's history brings to bear on our current situation. Herein lies a timely, central issue for those of us who obsess about the future of photographic thinking. These projects are key propositions for what photography carries forward into the 21st century, as a bid for us to remember that photography is an act of making choices. This includes choices regarding methods and style of vision, which need not be defined by the fashionable, marketable production values of an era.

It's still proving difficult for me to find the words on the tip of my tongue for describing what exactly I recognize in the work, say, of Osamu Kanemura, what it is that I sense to be a timely departure in black-and-white photography's routing. His complex yet finely edited and framed Japanese street scenes show a mastery of photographic form, the likes of which staccatos through the 20th century canon of the genre. Maybe it is the inherent formalism of the photographs that triggers my interest here—the very idea that a contemporary art photographer has so explicitly blended pragmatics and concept, deciding that monochrome is the only way to convey a specific vision. The work deftly circumvents the accusation of arch-Modernism by

carrying the energy of the enduring "signature" in photography of personal, urgent, visual discovery. Of course, the "look" and full significance of such gestures can depend on the regional history an artist responds to. In Japan, for example, early photography was unfettered by the inferiority complex about its relationship to painting and drawing that it had suffered in the West. Photography has been a liberated and daring medium throughout its history in Japan, as epitomized by the photography and publication practices of the Provoke Group, and the experimental qualities of black-and-white photography have been continuously kept alive.

In the UK, where photography has traditionally struggled for legitimacy, not to mention remained submissive to the glamour of the American, MoMA-dominated history, the debate about our monochrome history has barely begun. Jason Evans's *The New Scent* series stands out as a contemporary black-and-white project that fuses that adoration of succinct, strong, magical picture-making with the British talent for celebrating the oblique and obscure. In the Czech Republic where creative art photography is still predominantly defined by signature black-and-white style and virtuoso printing skills, the work of Marketa Othova and Jasansky and Polak stand out as beacons of radical departure. In different ways, both Othova and the creative partnership of Jasansky and Polak question the need for a distinctly identifiable technique. Othova's photographs could easily be found photographs, re-photographed, with her "signature" present in the rhythmic, semiotic experience of her sequencing. Jasansky and Polak's surveys of the Czech landscape are as anonymous and conserving of a culture's passing as any Bernd and Hilla Becher series, but without the rigidity of taxonomy or a fixed vantage point, they leak a mournful Romanticism for what will disappear with economic "progress"—speaking both photographically and socially.

With equal force, in the US, the radicalism of photographic craft is felt. Walead Beshty's large photograms of crumpled, silver nitrate-sensitized papers take an ideologically impactful stance. While I think that the jury is still out as to whether more than a sophisticated minority can intuit the difference between an active and unreconstructed pastime of homemade abstract photography and the critical rethinking of a sidelined process, this is hardly a criticism to level at this artist's intentions. The works work. They make you think about the objecthood of photography right now. You can choose to see such a gesture of unique happenstance as essentially formal or as the ascendance of strategies that resist and confound the de-politicized, decorative tsunami of photography-as-art that we are currently submerged beneath. (I'm going to leave in the "de-politicized" of the previous sentence although, on re-reading, I wonder if I am perhaps referring to a zone that is in synergy with the politics of the art market. If this is the case, the very idea of creating photographs consciously outside of the aesthetics and rhetoric privileged within art offers a timely alternative to the dominant ideology of contemporary art.)

The same thrill of the formal and psychological play between two- and three-dimensional space, the joy and terror of looking photographically, that very same picking up of the baton between arch-Conceptualist and photo-geek that permeates the work of Christopher Williams and James Welling (here's hoping their ascendance continues), is also alive in the photography of Shannon Ebner. In both her curatorial practice and her current *The Sun & the Sign* exhibition, Ebner ignites our sensitivity to the visual charge that black-and-white photography can give to a subject, no matter how slight or bizarre. This is the artist whom I am currently whooping for the most; she expresses and summarizes The New Color and the change of gear, the thoughtful, earnest, and daring expression of our medium. I get the same thrill surveying the edges of her prints as I do looking at the photogram traces of collodion negative damage at the corners of an ambitious Edouard Baldus print. Here is the equivalent visual charge that Man Ray gave to Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare* in his *Dust Breeding*. Ditto the way that Michael Queenland's fetishistic monochrome creates a deep yet playful contemporary relevance for Robert Mapplethorpe's brilliant combinination of reserved photographic classicism and unrestrained psychosexuality.

The contemporary black-and-white photography I've described above has moved my thinking about the present state of photography onto a much more optimistic platform. Through these contemporary manifestations, the true, maverick character of photography, of our medium's history, is far from lost. Indeed, these threads of the past are given new and meaningful effect. I am not proposing that contemporary black-and-white photographic prints represent the full embodiment of the future for photographic practice, just that the degree of self-determination that I am sensing in these photographers' work is timely. I'm enjoying their contrary and imaginative choice to work in a monochrome media at a time when photography's value as a contemporary way of seeing is to be questioned.