DARKNESS AND LIGHT: DEATH AND BEAUTY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

by Stephen R. Moriarty
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LOOKING AT PICTURES

An essay by Lawrence S. Cunningham

Book design by Robert P. Sedlack, Jr.
Acknowledgments

The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, takes great pride and pleasure in presenting these photographs from the permanent collection. Stephen R. Moriarty, the Milly and Fritz Kaeser Curator of Photography, selected photographs to represent two universal subjects: death and beauty (darkness and light). Many of the images were already in the collection; Moriarty acquired others in recent years to develop this theme.

The images are carefully paired on the pages of this catalog. In some cases the logic is explained in Moriarty’s essay; in other cases the reader must discern thematic, compositional, or wry rationale for pairings.

I am grateful for the thoughtful response offered by Professor Lawrence Cunningham, The Reverend John A. O’Brien Chair in Theology at Notre Dame. His essay deftly provides a means for us to look at anew—or to “contemplate”—often familiar images by reminding us “every photograph is an act of loss, and in that loss is poignancy.”

Notre Dame Associate Professor of Design Robert Sedlack skilfully combined images and text; editor Sarah Tremblay Gauley managed the words. Our accomplished “Exhibition Team” installed the photographs. Members include Associate Director Ann Knoll, Chief Preparator Greg Denby, Exhibition Designer John Phegley, and Exhibition Coordinator Ramiro Rodriguez.

Last in order, but first in my mind, are the many generous benefactors who either have given artworks or provided funding for their purchase. They are recognized in credit lines in the book’s appendix.

All these gifts of art, time, talent and funds further the artistic mission of the Snite Museum of Art: to nourish and challenge the human spirit by exhibiting and interpreting works of art.

Charles R. Loving
Director and Curator, George Rickey Sculpture Archive
Imagine, if you will, that the year is 1844, and you find yourself in the cemetery in the old Greyfriars churchyard in Edinburgh, Scotland, on a bright, sunny day. A small group of men and women has just walked in. One of them, probably a chemist named Robert Adamson, carries a photographic outfit which includes a simple wooden camera with a lens and a tripod. The image cast by the lens will not fall on film (or on an electronic sensor) but rather on sheets of paper that have been treated to make them sensitive to light.

Another member of the party is the painter David Octavius Hill, who formed a partnership with Adamson to produce photographs for various clients. Someone, possibly Hill, has chosen several sites to be photographed that day and poses different figures within the scenes. In the photograph seen here (page 6), the camera takes in a small part of the edge of the cemetery, with a row of shops, rooftops, and chimneys of the city fading into the distance.

The man seated on the left is believed to be Hill himself. He and two friends are focusing their attention on a tomb of one of the Covenanters, Scottish religious nationalists of the mid-seventeenth century. The monument was erected later; after their revolt had succeeded. By the time Hill and Adamson photographed the tomb, it was already a relic of the past and of a man long gone.
Today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, we might see this rare photographic print as a survivor of the early days of the medium. Then we realize we are looking back at a scene that describes an encounter in 1844 with an older monument commemorating events that happened even earlier. Time both collapses and telescopes at the same moment.

It can be argued that the photograph has the quality of beauty, possibly because of its careful composition or because it captures some of the delightful experience of being outside on the grass on a sunny summer day. It is also fairly obvious that it relates to death, but is it because it is in a cemetery, because it commemorates the death and suffering of the thousands of Covenanters murdered by the British, or because these young pilgrims have now been dead for over a century? It is left up to viewers to decide whether either (or neither) feeling is present and how that may (or may not) affect their responses to the picture.

The photographs in this book have been selected for their relationship to the concepts of death and beauty. The “death” photographs are not just depictions of lifeless bodies (although there are some of those) but also images that illustrate fear, pain, alienation, loneliness, anger, destruction of places, destruction of cultures or races, sorrow, or hatred. Similarly, the “beauty” photographs are not just depictions of attractive people or things (although there are some of these, too) but also images that illustrate care, compassion, healing, growth, happiness, the preservation of places and cultures, grace, or love.

The Covenanters’ Tomb, Greyfriars Churchyard, Edinburgh, ca. 1844–1845
David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson
Another way to look at death and beauty in this context is to think of darkness and light. Darkness has long been associated with the presence of shadows, evil, or depression. In the Bible, one of the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians is darkness (Exodus 10:21–29), and darkness is described in the New Testament (Matthew 8:12) as a place of punishment, where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In contrast, light brings salvation. “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned” (Matthew 4:16).

Perhaps photographs of beauty are the easiest to relate to. How many times have we said, or heard someone else say, “Look at that sunset! It’s beautiful! Quick, get the camera!” Bright flowers and colorful fall trees are perennial favorites, as are children and pets. There are some photographs in this selection that capture that sense of wonder at the landscape and its inhabitants.

Some do it on a grand scale, including Joel Meyerowitz’s luminous colored picture of tide flats on Cape Cod (page 8), Robert MacPherson’s glorious depiction of the waters cascading at Tivoli (page 10), Charles Marville’s study of the dramatic clouds over Paris, with the dome of the Invalides in silhouette (page 12), and Edward Weston’s view looking out over the desert from a ghost town on a hill (page 13). Others are more intimate, such as Gustave Le Gray’s lusciously-lit rutted road through the Forest of Fontainebleau (page 11), Anne Brigman’s allegorical landscape featuring a nude model high on a rock in the California Sierras (page 14), Edward Steichen’s shot of the moon rising over a New England pond (page 16), and Harry Callahan’s image of his wife and daughter standing in a tranquil Lake Michigan, just a few steps away from downtown Chicago (page 17).

A kind of everyday beauty surrounds us, a beauty we may easily miss if not gently nudged by a photographer’s eye. It would be easy to overlook the dreamlike play of light shining through a curtain onto a windowsill (page 18), the sense of a hot, sleepy Midwestern summer day (page 18), the graceful curves of a tiny plant (page 19), or the lovely little sycamore tree by the street on a rainy New York day (page 20).

Likewise, there are photographs that seem to obviously describe death. Two images of home funerals, separated by time and space, were taken by Shelby Lee Adams (page 22) in Appalachia and W. Eugene Smith in Spain (page 25). A Frenchman has an encounter with a head of a decapitated calf (page 23), and France sends a warning to those who might fight against their colonial rule by exhibiting the heads of executed rebels (page 23). Dead soldiers are photographed after battles on the fields of Antietam, Maryland (page 70), in Korea (page 71), Berlin (page 75), and Kuwait (page 77).

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Cape Cod, from the Bay/Sky series, 1976
Joel Meyerowitz

Slag Processing, Indiana Harbor,
August 31, 2006
Terry Evans
The Falls of Tivoli, ca. 1858–1860
Robert MacPherson

Sed Publica (Public Thirst), 1934
Manuel Álvarez Bravo

Forest of Fontainebleau, ca. 1853
Gustave Le Gray
Sky Study, Paris, with the Dome of the Invalides in Silhouette, ca. 1860
Charles Marville

Ghost Town—Rhyolite, Nevada, 1938
Edward Weston
Finis, 1912
Anne Brigman

La Buena Fama Durmiendo
(Good Reputation Sleeping), 1938
Manuel Alvarez Bravo

next spread:
The Pond—Moonlight, 1904
Edward J. Steichen

Eleanor and Barbara,
Lake Michigan, 1953
Harry Callahan
Windowsill Daydreaming, 1958
Minor White

Wind and Water No. 1, 1940
Carl Distler
Aconitum: Aconite, Wolf’s-Bane, Monk’s Hood. Young Shoot Enlarged 6 Times, 1928 Karl Blossfeldt

Untitled, from Roll, Jordan, Roll, ca. 1929–33 Doris Ulmann
Spring Showers, New York, 1900
Alfred Stieglitz

Nude, 1909
Clarence H. White

Le Manège de Monsieur Barré
(The Carousel of Mister Barré), 1955
Robert Doisneau
Postmortem of John Dillinger, Chicago, July 22, 1934
Unidentified Photographer

The Home Funeral, 1990
Shelby Lee Adams
L’innocent, 1949
Robert Doisneau

Severed Heads of Revolutionaries, French Indochina, ca. 1895
Unidentified Photographer

next spread:
Family Portrait with Dead Mother and Family Photographs, ca. 1895
Unidentified Photographer

Wake in a Spanish Village, 1951
W. Eugene Smith
Veterans Hospital and Home at Invalidovna, Czechoslovakia, 1922–1927
Josef Sudek

Red Jackson, Harlem Gang Leader, 1948
Gordon Parks
Below the Surface

Another category to consider is photographs that seem at first glance (and maybe even second glance) to be all about beauty, but have dark undertones. Consider the picture by Czech photographer Josef Sudek (page 26). We see a space softly lit from behind, putting the figure of the man at the table in silhouette. A glass bottle on the table gleams, while pipe smoke settles in a soft cloud. Then we discover that the photo was taken in a soldiers’ rehabilitation home in Prague after World War I. Why is the man there; what happened to him on the battlefield? Sudek was present not just as a photographer but also as a fellow patient; he lost his left arm in combat and was trying to learn how to set up his tripod and camera and make an exposure with one arm. A photograph that has a strong visual affinity to Sudek’s is a striking picture by Gordon Parks (page 26), taken during his early years for Life magazine. In the accompanying essay we learn that the young man, Red Jackson, is a gang leader in Harlem, hiding out after hearing of a threat on his life.

Like the figure in Sudek’s picture, the proud old man in Hector Garcia’s portrait (right) is a veteran, but of a different war. We are told only that he is an old Zapatista, the revolutionary guerrilla movement formed in Chiapas, Mexico, about 1910 by Emiliano Zapata. He is fortunate to have lived to such a ripe old age, since estimates of the death toll of the conflict, including those from hunger and illness, total over one million people.
Portraits often become more complex when we learn the stories of the lives of the sitters. Consider the migrant farm woman in Horace Bristol’s depression-era photograph (right). Bristol was a California photographer in the 1930s who became aware of the plight of the refugees of the Dust Bowl (sometimes called “Okies,” since many were from Oklahoma), who went west to find jobs but often ended up living in poverty in refugee camps. Bristol decided to make a book of stories and photographs that would expose their plight to a national audience. He enlisted the help of a young writer who had written sympathetically about workers—John Steinbeck. They visited the camps, where Bristol photographed the residents and Steinbeck conducted interviews with the same people. After a few weeks, Bristol sent Steinbeck a set of photographs and waited for him to produce the accompanying text. But after some stalling, Steinbeck confessed that he had abandoned their project and written a novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. The woman in the photograph was the model for the strong, long-suffering Ma Joad, both in the novel and in the movie that followed.¹

¹“Ma Joad” in Migrant Camp, California, 1938
Horace Bristol
A young girl in her First Communion dress faces us in Milton Rogovin’s 1973 portrait taken in Buffalo’s lower west side (page 30). Rogovin, an optometrist and lifelong socialist, has shot several series of portraits of working-class folk, including miners in Appalachia, Cuba and Chile. This girl lived in a run-down neighborhood near his office, where he often walked and asked permission to take pictures. When asked about the circumstances of the shoot forty years later, Rogovin claimed it was too long ago, hesitated, and then remembered one thing: the apartment of the girl’s family was very dirty, and her older brother tried to block out some of the squalor by hanging the bedspread behind her.²

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What Does Your Face Show? ca. 1936–40
Peter Sekaer

Prostitue, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1936
Peter Sekaer
Untitled, from Buffalo, Lower West Side Series, 1973
Milton Rogovin

Fitness America Contestants, Redondo Beach, California, 1998
Lauren Greenfield
A more sinister, and sad, story lies behind Deborah Luster’s portrait of Donald Garringer (left). Formally, it is similar to Rogovin’s picture, but a more tragic history accompanies Garringer. At the time he posed for Luster in a hot Louisiana cotton field in 1999, he was inmate 115224 at Angola Prison. Scratched on the back of the photo is the information that he was born in 1962 and was incarcerated in 1990 to serve a life sentence. Luster’s interest in the lives of lawbreakers came from a personal experience: a relative hired a man to kill her mother, and in the ensuing trial she became aware of how destructive to life crime can be. She obtained permission to take portraits of willing prisoners and eventually handed out more than twenty-five thousand wallet-size pictures, which were sent from prisons to friends and family, sometimes resulting in visits or letters for people who had not had either for years, if ever. Luster commented that one of the tragedies of being in prison is that inmates are emotionally and physically alone, and her photographs expedited what she simply called “contact.”

Donald Garringer, Angola, Louisiana, 1999
Deborah Luster
Faces of Childhood: Innocence, Joy, Fear, Race, and Sex

Generally, photographs of children are taken to celebrate the joy of life, to capture the fleeting expressions that will rapidly change, or possibly just to boast about one’s grandchildren. One photograph that fits these criteria is Gertrude Käsebier’s beautiful platinum print of her daughter reading to her grandson (page 34). Käsebier was probably the best-known and most respected woman photographer in America in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Besides running a successful studio, she exhibited and published as an equal alongside the great camera artists of the period, such as Alfred Stieglitz (page 20), Edward Steichen (page 16), and Clarence White (page 20). After her children were grown, she realized that because of the time and energy she had put into her work, she had neglected to document her own children. She began a series of personal images of her family that were gathered into albums, from which this particular photograph comes.4 This image is a great example of Käsebier’s subtle sense of design, because the tree, its shadow, and the gentle curve of the path frame the triangular shape (a symbol of stability) of the child and his mother, whose long hair blows in the wind.

Gertrude and Charles O’Malley of Newport, Rhode Island, ca. 1903
Gertrude Käsebier

In contrast, consider three photographs that each feature three children: Diane Arbus’s image of triplets in their New Jersey bedroom (page 36), Lewis Hine’s three boys from South Carolina (page 37), and the two girls and a boy draped in a large American flag (page 38). At first glance, the picture of the triplets could be a simple documentation of multiple births; but on further study, it becomes much more ominous. Although their faces are identical, the girls on either side look very solemn, while the middle one wears a faint smile. The bedroom itself reinforces the concept of repetition and multiplicity, from the patterns on the wall and bedspread to the rows of ruffles on the curtain. With a very subtle touch, Arbus has exposed and printed the photo so that the girls’ dresses blend into one dark shape, as though they were all emerging from one lower body.

Intricate, Untitled, from Tulsa, 1980
Larry Clark
The other two photographs were meant to be factual documents that would inspire the viewer to take a stand against injustice. Hine’s picture was part of a large body of work assembled to make the public aware of the extensive and evil practice of child labor. The photographer visited mines, glass factories, slum workshops, urban streets, and textile mills to gather visual and written evidence of this national scandal, which few people had actually witnessed themselves. He took careful notes to counteract claims that he was exaggerating or faking conditions. The full caption for this image, as he typed it, reads, “Maple Mills, Dillon, S.C. Lonnie Baker (tallest) Has doffed 4 years. Gets 40 cents a day. Bertie Baster—10 years old. 3 years in mill Runs 3 sides = 30 cents a day.” Doffers ran back and forth in a mill, replacing the full spindles with empty ones. A “side” was one of the long rows of spindles on each machine. In addition to the fact that it kept children out of school, the work was dangerous and unsafe. Many lost fingers or even arms and legs in these industrial settings. Children in coal mines developed “black lung” disease, while those in mills, like Lonnie and Bertie, could develop “brown lung” from inhaling cotton textile dust.
A more complex story lies beneath the smiles of Rosa, Charley, and Rebecca, identified on the mount of the third image as “Slave Children from New Orleans.” Rosina (Rosa) Downs, Charles, and Rebecca were part of a group of slaves who had been freed when the Union Army captured New Orleans in 1863. That same year they were sent north on a tour to raise money for schools for former slaves which were being constructed by Northern abolitionist groups. At each stop, photographs were taken and sold to audiences who heard the stories of the children. At first three adults also participated in the tour; but it was discovered that they did not elicit much sympathy. When the group decided to make a side trip to Philadelphia, the two darker-skinned children were left behind, leaving only the three with the lightest skin and eyes; it seems that Northerners found nothing particularly shocking about dark-skinned children being enslaved. Audiences became especially fascinated with the two girls, particularly the “prettiest,” Rosa.\(^5\) The successful sale and popularity of this series of photographs raise many questions about the perception of race in mid-nineteenth-century America and about the role photography played.
It has been suggested that the nineteenth century began with the belief that what was written was true, and it ended with the belief that what was photographed was true. While Southerners encountered slaves frequently, if not daily, Northerners had little or no personal experience of the “peculiar institution.” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s enormously popular (and flawed) novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the closest that most had ever come to the daily lives of slaves. If you attended a church that was antislavery, you might occasionally hear a testimony from a freed or escaped slave, such as the renowned orator Frederick Douglass. In such an environment, photographs became even more important as “true” witnesses.

The shocking “truth” of this photograph was not that it was terrible to enslave a child, but that three children who had African-American ancestors somewhere in their past could look so white. Contemporary viewers, like many today who are shown the image, would have looked carefully to see if the children’s hair and faces held any clue to their being partially black. It was obvious that any of the three could have passed for white on any American street. This then raised the question, who do I know who appears to be white but is actually black? Perhaps a husband, wife, or lover? Or even one’s own parent, with the dreaded implication?

There is yet another explanation for the success of such photographs, an even darker one. New Orleans was widely known as a place where the slave markets often specialized in the sale of light-skinned “fancy girls,” regularly purchased to become someone’s mistress or to work in a brothel. To add another layer of complexity, consider the circumstances surrounding the marketing of the children’s photograph. Rosa, Charley, and Rebecca would have been presented to a viewing audience along with a narrative explaining that these children, so “white,” innocent-looking and vulnerable, had been rescued by the Union from a fate of terrible exploitation, leaving the audience to imagine what that would have been. Then, photographs of groups or individuals (Rosa was the most popular subject) would have been offered for sale, in an eerie imitation of an actual slave auction.

*opposite page:*
*Our Protection. Rosa, Charley, Rebecca.*
*Slave Children from New Orleans, 1864*
*Charles Paxson*
Nostalgic Document or Visual Obituary?
The Life and Death of Cultures and Races

Another group of photographs included here relates not to an individual’s death but rather to the death of a culture or a large group of people, often of the same ethnic group. A moving example of this kind of image is Roman Vishniac’s picture taken in Warsaw’s Jewish ghetto sometime between 1933 and 1939 (page 40). The photograph captures a slice of time on a sunny day, its casual composition reminiscent of a snapshot. A woman looks away at something outside the frame, shielding her eyes with a gesture that could also indicate worry or despair. A boy on the left is busy with some activity, his back turned towards the camera. He and the woman balance the two sides of the picture, with a pair of young boys in the middle sitting and studying something, perhaps a book or a magazine. The boys and the woman are framed by a large open doorway, the interior in darkness.

It is the context of the photograph that transforms its meaning for the viewer. Vishniac was a Russian Jew who had studied biology and medicine in Moscow before immigrating to Berlin. An American organization hired him to document the worsening conditions for Jews living in eastern Europe under the rise of Nazism. After he finished the commission he kept on traveling and photographing in Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Lithuania. He was arrested eleven times, and often had to bribe his way out of police custody and across borders. Vishniac knew that the world he was photographing would cease to exist after Adolf Hitler applied his “final solution,” and he wanted not only to preserve it for future generations but also to convince Western countries to intervene to save lives. Within a few years after this picture was taken, the woman and children and their world had all ceased to exist.

Courtyard in a Jewish House, Warsaw Ghetto, ca. 1933–1939
Roman Vishniac

Untitled (New York City), ca. 1957–1960
David Heath
An anonymous photograph of a lynching similarly confronts us with the terrible results of ethnic and racial hatred (right). Leo Frank, a Jewish mechanical engineer, had moved from Brooklyn to be part owner and plant manager of the National Pencil Factory in Atlanta, Georgia. One Saturday, Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year-old girl who worked at the factory, came to see Frank to obtain a paycheck she was owed. The next morning at 3AM, her battered body was discovered in the basement by Newt Lee, a black man who was the night watchman. Frank was accused of the murder on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of a janitor, Jim Conley. (Years later, it was shown that the janitor had lied and was himself the murderer.)

One might think that Newt Lee would have been the prime suspect, based on racial hatred, but other hatreds came to dominate the incident. The Leo Frank trial occurred at a time when not only racism but anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic hatred were raging in the South, as well as in rural areas of the North. The “lustful Jew” Leo Frank was convicted. It was such a travesty that the governor of Georgia commuted Frank’s death sentence, hoping he could get a fairer trial when tempers cooled. But it was not to be. A mob broke into a prison farm and kidnapped Frank. Driving back toward Atlanta, they pulled over