

History of Photography

Exhibition Review

UCR/California Museum of Photography

The UCR/California Museum of Photography offered unusual and interesting photographs. The featured exhibit “Photography on the Edge,” highlighted the works of several photographers including Lee Goodie, Alexandre Lobanov and Howard Finster. They described their work as photography on the outside, which consisted of using a variety of approaches including montage and fanciful printing to multiple printing and hand-coloring, to create innovative and compelling art. According to the attached pamphlet, “to define outsider photography, one must understand that photography has always been thought of as being outside traditional art.” While I spent several minutes studying these photographs, I found them just a bit too edgy for my underdeveloped tastes.

As I continued to traverse the museum, I came across an exhibit by an artist that, thanks to my photography class, I actually recognized. Not only did I recognize the name Ansel Adams, I have quickly become a fan of his work. Landscape photography appeals to my sense of the romantic and addresses my personal respect for the natural beauty in this world. In viewing the work of Ansel Adams, I found myself smiling at several of his photographs, and repelled yet fascinated by one in particular.

The photograph titled Buddhist Grave Markers and Rainbow. Maui Hawaii. Negative 1956. Print 1981. Gelatin Silver Print., by Ansel Adams, repulsed me at first glance. There was

something morbid and very unsettling about the stacking of grave monuments depicted in this photograph. This unexpected and strangely disturbing photograph by Ansel Adams, led me to imagine that they buried more than one individual beneath this collage of grave markers. It gave me chills and yet, I could not ignore it.

The center of focus for this photograph is the entire grave marker, a continuous balance of light and dark which gave me the impression that the effect was completely natural and untouched by the photographer. I do not know if the artist manipulated this print (I remember reading that Adams was a pictorialist at one time), but the contrast made me believe that other things had taken place just outside my own comprehension. A battle may have been going on between good and evil. The sizes of the markers, the similar shapes with smooth rounded tops or sharp square edges, and the surrounding landscape hinted at this being a graveyard of unusual proportions. This feeling prevailed even into the rocks lining one side of the photo. Every where in the photograph there is light playing off dark, black versus white, encompassed in shades of gray.

I believe that Adams intentionally chose a time of day when there would be little natural or day light, in order to direct your eye to the center of the photograph. It may also be the reason why there are very few shadows, that and the angle the Adams choose to shoot from. This choice greatly emphasizes the differences in each marker, their markings and discolorations, and gives the light that shines on the very top marker greater significance. The lighted top marker, which has dark engravings down the front and a dark round ball with what appear to be grooved plates attached to the sides, looks as though it has fought its way up through the markers and now triumphantly stands atop the pile, victorious and wearing a crown.

Then there is the rainbow, natural or unnatural, it symbolized for me a sense that after all conflict has ceased, there is hope. The rainbow racing across the gray sky gives one the impression that it was time to rest. The fact that there is a rainbow in the midst of this black and white world seems very pictorialist in style and romantic in nature. Where exactly did it stem from? Although there is an ocean just past the edge of the rocks which line the right side of the photograph, the time of day does not seem conducive to rainbows. Yet it could have been the photographer's intention to leave you questioning this particular phenomenon. Does this rainbow originate here or is it even an original part of the photograph? The fact that I was unable to answer these questions during my research only made this photograph that much more engaging and intriguing. I cannot say if I liked or disliked this photograph. What I can honestly say is that I was fascinated by and curiously drawn to this photograph, in spite of my initial feelings of revulsion.

There were other Ansel Adams photographs on display. Among them were Trailside near Juneau, Alaska.c.1944.; Clearing Winter Storm, Yosemite National Park, California.c.1944. Gelatin Silver Print; Monument Valley, Arizona.c.1985; and, Mission San Xavier del Bac. Tucson, Arizona. I can say without qualification that I found these and other examples of his work, viewed online, quite appealing. The fact that Ansel Adams was a great nature lover explains why I am thoroughly drawn to his photographs. For me, nature is the greatest artist of all time. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to the UCR/California Museum of Photography. It is an experience that I look forward to repeating.