

Gallery Guide

The Interpretive Image

Selections from Prairie State College Foundation's Permanent Photography Collection
Featuring newly donated acquisitions from The Museum Project

This exhibition, **The Interpretive Image**, features selected works from the College's Permanent Photography Collection. There are three distinct sections to the exhibition: one features works by some of the most well-known photographers in the 20th century, including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Aaron Siskin, Jerry Uehlsmann, Joseph Jachna and Ray Metzger. Another wall shows two works each by three artists whose larger portfolios are owned by PSC, Manuel Carrillo, Michael Johnson and Danny Lyons. The last section features at least one work by each of the recently acquired works by contemporary photographers from The Museum Project.

The title **The Interpretive Image** highlights the idea that photography is not simply a replication of reality, but that photographers edit and choose what they photograph, using a highly trained "eye" to decide what to emphasize in an image and how to accomplish the desired outcome. In an era where phones are used to "point and shoot", everyone thinks of himself or herself as a photographer. The use of digital editing also allows for technical ease in making a photo appear "professional". But there is a distinct difference in photography as art and photography as a recording activity. The difference lies in intent and aesthetics.

When photography was invented in 1839, there was a sense of wonder at the idea that an image of reality could be captured onto film. The immediacy of taking a photograph was considered exciting, given that prior to this, any depiction of "reality" was done through drawing, painting, or hand-drawn printmaking. In fact, early photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined the term, "the decisive moment," referring to the idea of instantaneously capturing an event that is ephemeral and spontaneous. Cartier-Bresson felt that in that spontaneous moment, he captured in his photographs the essence of that event in that exact time; the image becomes frozen and iconic. He stated, "We photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished there is no contrivance on earth which can make them come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory." His image, *The Puddle*, exemplifies this. Photography eventually liberated painters from having to draw or paint realistically, and moved painting eventually to Impressionism, where brushstrokes could be apparent, without the high level of finish needed to replicate what was actually seen by eye. But photographers themselves began to think about how to interpret what they were shooting, and at times used gels to cloud the lens in order to make the picture more atmospheric and painterly. Thus was born the art form of photography, rather than just making images to report and record a scene, a person, or other objects.

When a photographer approaches a subject, he or she likely has an idea or theme in mind; at times, experimentation allows for highly unexpected results, but control of the image is always a consideration. Photographers use focal point, emphasis, light and shadow, direction and line, sometimes color, precise or blurred focus and point of view to make their images distinct. A subject matter may be in strong light while the rest of the photograph is in shadow, to emphasize the focal point of the work. One part of the image may be in strong focus, while shallow depth of

field might cause other parts of the image to be blurred. A photograph might be taken from a strong angle to distort an image, or it might be taken from an airplane or drone to make the viewpoint from high above the subject. A photograph could be used to stop motion, much like Joseph Jachna's works showing an image of the motion of water but frozen in time, or Bonnie Schiffman's *Two Heads*, depicting motion in a portrait of Robbin Williams. Focus might be soft and atmospheric in an image, such as the work, *Nude*, by Edward Weston. Ansel Adams was known for creating prints that allowed for an enormous range from white to black with all the values in between, making crisp images that celebrated the beauty of nature; this is evident in his gelatin silver print, *Mirror Lake*.

Much like any other type of artist, every photographer uses his tools distinctly to create the aesthetic choices in his or her imagery. Part of this work was traditionally done in the darkroom, where photographers could manipulate the lightness or darkness of a print by the amount of time a print was in its chemical bath, or by exposing the paper to more or less light, or even by layering negatives, such as in the work, *Academic Pursuit*, by Jerry Uehlsman. That meant that each darkroom print could potentially be different, and while editions of prints were created, one print might vary marginally from the other in an edition. Even in traditional print cameras, a photographer could use a filter, or various settings to affect the negative made. Currently, with digital photography, this manipulation can be done in the camera, with filters or other programs, or on the computer through various photo programs. These aesthetic choices highly affect the viewers' understanding and interpretation of any type of subject matter.

Equally important to the "interpretive image" is the subject matter chosen by each photographer. One photographer might emphasize the beauty of a subject by choosing forms that are traditionally admired, such as in the plant photograph, *Agave*, by Michael Johnson, or by abstracting nature into exquisite design, such as *Solace 8* by Suda House or *Alabama #17-7* by Barry Andersen. Another photographer might choose to capture a slice of daily life to create narrative, as in the untitled photograph of Manuel Carrillo of young boys playing baseball. Photographer Danny Lyons chooses to focus on a subject that might not otherwise be seen by the general public; his project of photographing prisoners in Texas prisons was seen as groundbreaking documentation. His photograph "*meal line*" is an example of these works. Other works might challenge our imaginations by superimposing what might seem to be unrelated images, as in Uehlsman's *Academic Pursuit*, mentioned previously.

As viewers of works of art, we respond both to content, (subject matter and the intent of why that was chosen) and aesthetics. Like painters, sculptors, performance artists and all other types of artists, photographers use whatever tools, points of view and choices of subject to make their interpretations that are works of art. The many photographs in the PSC Permanent Collection are widely varied in content, imagery and their aesthetic appearance, making for a rich source of imagery. At Prairie State College, the Permanent Collection is a highly valuable resource for our enjoyment as a community as well as for our education in what humans can create and interpret.

Beth Shadur, Curator

Christopher Art Gallery Director