

LETTER TO A YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHER

March 17, 1992

Dear Hans,

It was with great pleasure that we received your letter last week and learned that you and Nicole are well and that your photography continues to provide much satisfaction and new challenges.

Here, Paula and I have been far too busy, as usual. A few months ago we returned from another long photographing trip out West, and since then have been working day and night on the new book which will accompany my twenty-five year retrospective at the George Eastman House in June. I suppose having a firm deadline is a good thing. Paula tells me that without it I would be revising endlessly, trying forever to perfect the book. It seems that I am compelled to make things as fine as I can possibly conceive of them. I find, at times, that this uncompromising attitude is a curse as well as a blessing.

Your letter addresses some very important issues—issues crucial to what it means to be an artist. You wrote:

I did some printing of Shore Acres negatives this weekend. I'm quite sure you would like them. Sometimes I get very confused. Making 'traditional' landscapes like these feels very good—they seem to come naturally. So why not invest time, money and effort in doing more of this? However, I sometimes wonder if it is not necessary to try to make or find landscapes that reflect more of what I consider of 'our times'—there is so much damage done to the environment that it almost seems sort of senseless (and maybe too easy?) to continue looking for undisturbed beauty. Maybe here in Europe (so extremely overcrowded), more so than in your part of the world, one almost feels the responsibility to take a more political point of view, to condemn what is done to the landscape rather than to show its beauty. Maybe the answer is that a combination of the two would work for me; or simply that I should make up my mind! It may sound odd to your ears, but sometimes, in this part of the world at least, one almost feels ashamed to opt for the more or less traditional approach to the landscape.

Hans, many years ago, as a young photographer, I too, grappled with the same questions. Eventually, for myself, I arrived at answers. With the presumption that my conclusions may be of some help to you, I will respond to your dilemma.

For the artist, the maker, the function of art is, through the act of its making, the expressing of what one feels. (This is so even if the art produced is not "expressionistic.") Many years ago, I defined art as, "expression contained within a form." It is the form which makes something art; expression alone is not sufficient. An example: If you and I were having a conversation about this, it would not be art, but if we were having that same conversation on the stage in a darkened theatre, or if we were the actors in "My Dinner with André," it would be considered art. In this case the context would be providing the form.

Many artists have spent their entire working lifetimes dealing with the question of the form within which expression is contained. Some have even thought that the sole function of art is to provide new forms. In fact, the function of the avant-garde is to do just that. And with good reason. Old forms are often insufficient to contain the expressions demanded by the times—so new forms *must* be created if art is to remain a living force.

While the creation of new forms is often essential, alone, it does not guarantee that the art produced will be of value—that it will have the ability to connect us to the world in which we live and to each other. For art to do this, the form must first of all suit the expression that it contains. For example, the energy of an abstract expressionist painting contained within an eight-inch-square canvas would be unduly constricted. And a poetry reading in a huge stadium, without sufficient amplification, would be absurd no matter how truthful and inspiring the words. Next, not only must the form suit the expression, the expression itself must have depth. New forms alone are not guarantors that the expression will have depth.

Art which has depth comes from the core—that part of ourselves where the deepest natural feelings of love and truth arise. Over half a century ago, Wilhelm Reich discovered that human beings have three layers to their character structure: the outer superficial layer where the veneer of politeness reigns, the secondary layer where the rage that we all possess is contained, and the core. People often talk about “taking off their masks.” Usually, what they are referring to is the stripping away of the superficial layer and allowing what is underneath—the secondary layer—to reveal itself. When the rage and anger appear, they feel they have found the ultimate truth. They are unaware of the core, unaware that there is something deeper that remains after the anger and rage have been fully expressed. Much art today that is politically engaged comes from the secondary layer. This art expresses feelings that are often genuine, but art is capable of expressing even deeper feelings.

Different cultures and centuries provide different experiences of the world. Yet there is a common thread that runs throughout all humanity. It explains why we still thrill to the music of Bach, and why we find the cave paintings so powerfully truthful, even in reproductions in art history textbooks. This common thread connecting us is expression that has come from the core.

If the function of art is to connect us to each other and to the world in which we live, it is irrelevant whether a work of art is traditional or avant-garde. From this perspective, one’s choice of subject matter is also irrelevant. What is relevant is the truthfulness and depth of the expression and its synergistic connection to the form within which it is contained.

We live in a time when all this, to a great extent, has been ignored. All too often, art is evaluated according to the degree to which it is socially conscious and to the degree that its content and style exhibit a political and/or anti-establishment viewpoint. Certainly, there is a place for such angry works of art. We humans have made quite a mess of the world, and it is necessary that the situation be recognized and corrected. And the making of art is indeed one way of trying to deal with the problems we have created. But it is not the only way, and perhaps is not even a particularly effective way.

Because the angry voices are loud and pervasive these days, those whose motivation for making art that comes from their core rather than from their secondary layer may feel out of step and a misfit. You wrote that “making traditional landscapes feels very good. They seem to come naturally.” I know your photographs, Hans, and I know that they are not superficial. That can only mean that your interaction with the world is not superficial, that it comes from a deeper place. To work so that what we do feels very good and comes naturally is no small thing. Making photographs in such a manner is hardly anything to be ashamed of. It should be exalted.

As an artist, a maker, one does not *try* to make art that comes from the core—one does what one does from one’s own heart. And if it is truthful and deep, it may, in time, stand side by side with the great and moving art of the past, and have the power to connect us and to effect truly lasting change. So if you would like your work to make a difference, do not be swayed by what you read and hear, by what is *au courant*. The rapidity with which “movements” and “positions” in the art world fall in and out of fashion surely indicates their superficiality.

In response to your comment that it “seems sort of senseless (and maybe too easy?) to continue looking for undisturbed beauty,” may I suggest that you not go looking for undisturbed beauty, but that you just go looking—without preconception of what you might find. If you just go looking, who knows what you might find? You may find undisturbed beauty that moves you sufficiently to set up your cumbersome camera, or you may find something about which to protest. There is no right or wrong in this. The point is to follow your heart and to make the best pictures you can. Should they prove to be deeply moving, and should they someday join the great pantheon of art from the ages, so much the better. But that is not why one makes one’s pictures in the first place. Make your photographs when you are touched unbearably and cannot restrain yourself, when it is something you must do. Consider the finished print to be a bonus. And if you follow your heart, whether your photographs are successful or not, you will at least have had the pleasure of the experience of their making. That is no small thing.

I hope you may find this helpful. In time your questions will find answers. Do not rush them or worry about it. They will come of their own accord when they are ready.

May you continue to find joy and excitement in your work.

Paula joins me in sending wishes for every happiness to you and Nicole. We hope we will see you here next year.

Warmly, with a handshake,

Michael

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