

Negative Capability: The Photographs of Barbara Jaffe

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Staten Island, New York
September 1999

Because they look at their own negatives all the time, many photographers spend a good part of their working lives in another perceptual dimension. Few of them ever invite us to join them there. In this long-term project, Barbara Jaffe does just that. By copying onto film selected negatives, she generates positive transparencies that she then uses to make greatly enlarged versions of those original negatives -- images of the world as it appears registered on photographic film, before the standard printing processes convert those extrapolations back into the tonal relationships to which we're accustomed in traditional monochromatic photographs.

With this methodology, Jaffe underscores the fundamentally abstractive aspect of the photographic medium. What could rupture our perceptual habits more absolutely than the substitution of black for white, darkness for light? This act forces the viewer to learn to see again, and to think about seeing as a translative activity. It also plunges the viewer into what feels like an alternative, parallel universe, in which forms and structures become shape-shifters. Solids dematerialize, become mere tracers; the intangible congeals, air and sky take on weight and density.

Learning to read negatives is a heuristically acquired skill that comes out of time spent in the darkroom. Like sight-reading in music, abstractive vision is an acquired skill, not a natural ability. Just as a trained singer can peruse a score and hear the aria, so an experienced photographer could look at the several portraits here and recognize their subjects if they walked into the room. Those of us who haven't had that eyes-on education have to imagine our way into this work. We know what we're looking at -- a face, a flower, the back of a man's head; we just don't understand how we're looking at it. Thus we're made to scrutinize it as if for the first time.

This strategy of Jaffe's also stands a number of other assumptions on their heads. Though much of photography in all its forms depends on negatives, those renderings are rarely paid attention to by anyone aside from their makers. Used mostly as matrices from which to derive positives, they're infrequently studied, even more rarely exhibited. The field as a whole, and certainly the market, accentuates the positive.

Ansel Adams gave us the useful analogy that "the negative is the score, the print is the performance." Yet he was speaking about an approach to praxis (his own) whose intended

end results were photographic positives. What of a photographer like Jaffe, who visualizes and works toward the negative image as her final statement?

No question that this work is photography, in that word's original sense of drawing or writing with light. In fact, one could argue that there's nothing more purely photographic than the negative image, which encodes the light-sensitive material's actual transaction with the physical world in front of the lens. Save for direct-positive processes like the daguerreotype and the SX-70, no photographic artifact more authentically embodies the photographer's original vision. This work of Jaffe's suggests that the

photographic negative remains a surprisingly under-explored territory within the medium.

Beyond that, it reminds us of what John Keats defined as "negative capability." According to the Romantic poet, this is the quality a person possesses when "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In that state, according to Keats, there's no need to rationalize, because...the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration." That's the condition to which Jaffe's pictures aspire, and the state in which they leave the viewer who's willing to trust this work enough to surrender to it.

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