Forms and Patterns Found in a Natural State

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FORMS AND PATTERNS FOUND IN A NATURAL STATE

by

Andrew M. Whitlock

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
Art

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah
1979
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my graduate committee, R.T. Clark, Twain Tippetts, and Harrison Groutage, for sharing of their knowledge with me and especially for their sincere friendship. I am also grateful for my wife, Joyce, who has supported me throughout this program.

Andrew M. Whitlock
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEVELOPING PHILOSOPHY</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PROJECT</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntsville</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antelope Island</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Rocks</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Logan Canyon Spillway</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Huntsville</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Blacksmith Fork Canyon Spillway</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Big Cottonwood Canyon Spillway</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Logan</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Logan</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Antelope Island</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. City of Rocks</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. City of Rocks</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Antelope Island</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Logan Canyon</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Logan Canyon Spillway</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Little Cottonwood Canyon</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT
Forms and Patterns Found in a Natural State
by
Andrew M. Whitlock, Master of Fine Arts
Utah State University, 1979

Major Professor: Ralph T. Clark
Department: Art (Photography)

This creative project deals with the photographic study of forms and patterns found in a natural state. The photographer has covered a wide geographical area including Logan and Cache Valley, Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake, Shoshone Falls in southern Idaho and City of Rocks, also in southern Idaho. The objective of this project was to reveal the visual strength of natural forms, or man-made forms acted upon by natural elements, in black-and-white images. Subjects were studied under all seasonal conditions inorder to determine the best possible situation for enhancing the aesthetic qualities of the forms and patterns. It was the hope of the photographer to further enhance the power, boldness, or life-like character of the subjects through the technical manipulation made possible by the photographic process.

(30 pages)
INTRODUCTION

Our earth occupies a middle position among the planets moving around the sun. It is not the smallest; it is not the largest. Compared with other planets, the distinctive things about our earth are the narrow ranges of its surface temperature, the yet active inner forces of the earth's sphere, its covering watersphere, and its atmosphere. All these together change our environment, and in doing so produce incredibly eloquent forms and patterns in a natural landscape. The weathering elements decide the details of the sculpturing, as well as the arrangement in space of the individual forms and patterns.

Since 1839 photographers have been reproducing interesting images of rocks, trees, skies, landscapes, and many other impressive natural forms and patterns. Some recent photographs which we see today may resemble an Edward Weston, Walker Evans, or a Minor White print. Contemporary photographers continue to be moved by the inexhaustable supply of fascinating forms and shapes in our natural world. It is undeserved criticism to be condemned for learning from these early masters in the long search to develop our own best way to share nature's endless beauties.

Minor White has stated:

The obvious solution is to eliminate the phony criticism that abounds today. Another solution is to look into any young photographer today and then ask: Are any of his pictures as good as or better than
Edward Weston, or whoever? The material is out there for anyone to use. Everything in the world has been photographed a few million times and it does not stop.

At this time in the history of photography, everything has been done. All the novelties have been done; yet the pseudo-critics ask for more pseudo-originality.

All we have to look for now is, as a picture, does it move my heartstrings? If it does, why should I condemn it simply because it happens to look like something Weston did?

Few young people have the power, but every once in a while one does come through with as much power as Weston had. It is the nourishment value of the image that matters. Whether it looks like another photographer's work is a side issue, swollen out of all proportion today. (3:29) (underlining added)

It was not my intention to merely document objects in nature or make technical imitations of any other "nature" photographer's work. I received much positive influence from several master photographers who helped prepare a way before me for my own explorations. My goal was to isolate and record my subjects with a life and visual strength that nature had already created in them.
DEVELOPING PHILOSOPHY

I started Graduate School without any real idea or direction for my creative project. The following experiences solidified my direction and the course which was finally chosen to explore.

Shoshone Falls in southern Idaho presented a yet unexplored region in which to photograph. The area was made up mostly of massive volcanic rocks and weathered cliffs. I began climbing around on some of these rock forms where the water had eroded their surfaces. My hands could feel the hard but smooth texture of each form. I made a few exposures --nothing really too exciting--but felt that at least an effort had to be made. Initially, I had not been serious about photographing stones, feeling that the subject had already been over-photographed, but the more I climbed and examined the terrain, my eyes were seemingly drawn to individual forms.

The following quote by Fred Picker helped clarify, in my own mind, the special feeling one has when attracted to a particular object for an unknown reason.

For quite some time a little girl had been wandering about the pebbled beach near where I was working. Suddenly, she stooped and picked up one of the thousands of stones. 'Why did you pick up that one?' I asked. She gave me that incredulous look that children reserve for adults and said impatiently, 'Because it wanted me to'. She was drawn by that particular stone for no rational reason. In the same way, when the photographer is mysteriously drawn by the subject, the picture often has a
special power of purity. (9:84)

In 1976, Oliver Gagliani was the guest artist for Photography West. His work deeply moved me because his images seemed to be alive. I returned to the art gallery often to study each individual print, trying to determine why they moved me so deeply and perhaps gain a better understanding of photography in itself.

Later in the summer of 1977, Oliver Gagliani returned to Utah State University for a longer and more involved workshop. His work seemed even more intriguing, causing me to search through his book, entitled, Oliver Gagliani. (8:15) I gradually acquired a more solid understanding of his work and philosophy. This was an enlightening experience for me and my own work changed because of it.

Oliver Gagliani believes:

"Everything that exists in this world, whether it be a tree or a rock, a building or a chair, every object has a life of its own. It is a living thing to me, a being that exists within a given span of time. At some point it was put together, it has its birth as a unit, then it fills its life span of so many years, and eventually reaches decay and death. The problems it faces are the same problems that face human beings, and from the experience of their problems, these objects have gained a special wisdom". (8:15)

During the winters of 1977 and 1978, I was beginning to explore the possibilities of snow forms and patterns. My mind could now understand what Oliver Gagliani had said about things being created, and naturally decaying before eventual death. This life-death process evolved too quickly. Once, when I returned the very next day to the site of my exposure
of a snow form, curious to see if my feelings had changed, I discovered that what had been experienced before was no longer the same. This was a new insight for me. With this new understanding of ephemeral forms, I became excited over more promising possibilities for this creative project. It was as though the entire life span of this visual event had been captured upon the negative.

The delicate snow forms and patterns which were then discovered and explored revealed a full measure of their own life and magic. I was approaching my subjects quietly and photographing them with deep respect.
These snow forms and patterns on the spillways in Logan Canyon were deeply moving and excited me so much it was even difficult to remember how the camera worked. It became necessary to repeat out loud to myself the procedure of checking the aperture and making sure the shutter speed was set correctly.

I was concerned with controlling the dynamics of the subjects by the manner in which exposures were made and negatives developed. The combination of the dark and light areas not only can excite and attract the attention of the viewer, it dramatizes the visual experience, making the meaning more important, more dynamic. (See Fig. 1)

Oliver Gagliani said:

In music a fortissimo will sound louder if it is preceded by a soft passage, so in photography, a tone will appear lighter if it is surrounded by dark tones. What we have here is a kind of aesthetics of sound. (8:15)

Huntsville

While driving to Huntsville, Utah, to photograph the area around Kauzy Dam, I passed an old weathered building that had once been a "cowboy" bar. It had not been my intention to photograph the building, feeling that images of man-made structures would not relate to the natural forms which I had previously photographed for this project. But,
for some unknown reason, this dilapidated bar held a special attraction for me. Not looking for any symbolism, merely responding to a visual beauty, I decided to stop and make an exposure. The next day while developing and printing the negative made of this building, I realized that subconsciously a subtle transformation had been made from a natural form to a man-made form. As the photograph of the bar was positioned horizontally this relationship was very striking. The weathered pattern on the wall of the building resembled the same variations of dark and light caused by the running water upon the surface of the spillway. The whiteness of the snow juxtaposed with the dark background was repeated by the white fence-post standing naked against the dark wall. The tonal qualities of the prints and the interplay of these tonalities within each photograph were the same. The design of each image increased even more dramatically their inter-relatedness. (See Figs. 2 & 3)

This subconscious transformation opened up other such possibilities existing in a natural state. This was again illustrated in the following two images, figures 4 and 5. The shape of the snow form seemed suspended in space upon a dark plane. This surrealistic quality was again evidenced by the shingled structure which floated on a background of dark tonalities having very slight gradations of middle tones. Both photographs used this strong and dynamic contrast between light and dark to create boldness. The design of each was further cause for me to feel that a transformation had
again taken place. (See Figs. 4 & 5)

The touch of age can be very beautiful—old, weathered, abandoned, man-made structures are often more beautiful than new. The patterns may take years to create. With the death of an old building new visual possibilities can be born. (See Fig. 6)

Antelope Island

With the coming of summer, I started photographing Antelope Island, located in the Great Salt Lake, with its unusual rock formations. My first contact with these forms was during a summer workshop taught by Dave Bone. This first day was overcast and the shadowless light revealed the forms as they were. This visually stimulated me, aroused my curiosity about what could not be seen, and caused me to hope that the sun would present them for a short while—intensified by the more dramatic interplay of dark and light areas. However, with later visits I found that an overcast day with diffused light was more successful for photographing the forms on the island. Although the sunlight did change the entire mood and composition of the subjects, it seemed to create such distinct individualities between the stones that relating one to another was difficult.

While working, my objective had been to capture my first impression of these rock forms but found that these first feelings were not always reliable. Each individual form, or forms, had to be explored on its own unique terms
and in a most sensitive manner on my part.

Although there was evidence of destruction and decay, it was difficult, if not impossible, to experience the death of these structural forms. They seemed to be ageless, having endured through eons of time, owing their lives and personalities to the forces of nature. (See. Fig. 7)

City of Rocks

After reading a thesis written by Craig Law, entitled, City of Rocks, and seeing his dramatic prints, I became interested in doing some work in this promising area of southern Idaho. Although hoping Craig's work would not influence me too much until my own visualizations possessed me—the best negatives selected and prints finally made—it would not be known how similar, or different, my visual experiences would be when compared to Craig Law's. Craig was an excellent guide in bringing me here, but we responded in different ways to quite different forms, shapes, and changing patterns of light and shade. (6:1-29)

The rock forms were large and had a boldness about them unlike the small and sensitive forms on Antelope Island. I soon realized how essential it was to be aware of the slightest effect created by changing camera position. The subjects generally offered unparalleled opportunities to explore a wide variety of different viewpoints, and see new forms emerge from different angles and distances. My main concern with the formations remained unchanged—to photograph them
with a bold visual strength. When printing, this effect of boldness was further enhanced by using a more generous print size.

Only a small part of this region was photographed. Two images from City of Rocks were included in this project because of their success as bold visual statements made by natural forms. The strongly defined lines created by the straight rock-face meeting the sky, together with the distinct contrast of light and dark areas gives a dramatic quality to this photograph. Added interest is brought about by the delicate middle tones of the stone's surface. (See Fig. 8) This visual strength is again seen in the directional force of the crevices which radiate from the central stone form. This, coupled with the dark contrast of these crevices and the lighter tones of the rock wall, enhances the boldness created by the design of the images. (See Fig. 9)
Figure 1  Logan Canyon Spillway
Figure 2 Huntsville

Figure 3 Blacksmith Fork Canyon Spillway
Figure 4  Big Cottonwood Canyon Spillway

Figure 5  Logan
Figure 7: Antelope Island
Figure 8

City of Rocks
Figure 9

City of Rocks
Figure 10

Antelope Island
Figure 11

Logan Canyon
Figure 12

Logan Canyon Spillway
Figure 13 Little Cottonwood Canyon
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This project helped develop within me a greater understanding of the forces of nature at work and the many visual experiences it gives us. Natural forms are worked upon by the weathering elements to create unique entities of each structure, whether it be a rock, tree, or landscape. The distinctive individuality of such structures has been a source of endless visual pleasure and stimulation.

When we see we do many things: we can experience what is happening in a direct way; we discover something we never noticed or possibly never even looked for before; we become aware of something we eventually come to recognize and know through a series of visual experiences; we watch for evolving changes through patient observation. (4:3-7)

The problems encountered while working on this project were small, some being due to the weather in itself. It was necessary to photograph my subjects during different seasons of the year in order to determine the best possible conditions which would dramatize and aesthetically enhance the images. The extreme cold experienced while photographing in winter created a technical problem with my camera's shutter, slowing it down and causing incorrect exposures on my film. In order to protect myself against this problem two exposures were made and the negatives were developed one at a time. This allowed some room for error since any corrections needed
in development time could be made on the second negative.

The location of my subjects was also a problem. I had to expand my search for the right forms and patterns beyond Logan and Cache Valley, which provided me with some subjects. But, the need for new and inspiring images took a great deal of time and traveling into some rather remote areas not readily accessible by motor vehicle.

As far as the success of my photographs--they have to be judged on first impact, then through their staying power: their ability to implant themselves like seeds in a crevice of the mind, where the slow clockwork of germination begins. If they can survive the various trends of the coming years their value is certain. I feel that the classic designs, united with the visual strength of the images, and the aesthetic success of the photographs will make them an enjoyable visual experience for years to come.

This creative project has strengthened my positive attitudes towards photographing nature. So long as the earth continues, visual beauty will be found existing in a natural state, having been wrought by the elemental forces. The photographs included within this project each declare the visual strength of forms and patterns found in a natural state.

The experience of containing all or a portion of a given subject's life span on film, and viewing its problems and the special way in which the form has reacted to those problems, has created within me an empathy for both the
natural and man-made structures which made up the content of material photographed for this creative project. It is now possible to relate to them on the basis of survival, where trials and the daily outpouring of forces working against the individual constitutes much of one's life span. It is for this reason I feel a special closeness to my images.

The end of this project is only a beginning in the future of my work. It has aided my understanding of the aesthetic and technical aspects of photography. The visual statement made by these photographs is complete as I see and feel it.

Photography embodies an act of creation; it is the recording of a spirit on film to later be released in darkness. The act of making exposures of natural forms and patterns, and then re-creating them has kept my interest in this media stimulated.

The intrinsic quality of the subjects attracts me to them, the essence which permeates the images as I interpret them. The potential photographs exert an attraction which is not always evident but must be searched for until the perfect or pure image is impressed upon my mind because of its visual strength. It is similar to photographing wild beasts in a forest, feeling their presence among the dark green of the foliage.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


