

The Face of My Remembrance

Until what I wish for be unveiled, and appear in sight, out of its secret place"
St. Augustine, The Confections

A moment of synesthesia, confusion of the senses : while looking at (I was going to say poring over) the pictures of Stephen Sack I heard as much as saw something uncanny, an unbroken sound just above a whisper, and with it the sudden apprehension of a place-the scriptorium. The sound, a monk's voice forming words as shapes, tracing letters with a finger, committing a text to memory, seeking a divine recognition in the contingency of ink, vellum and thought's pantomime.

I attend to these photographs (I want to say manifestations) not because they seduce or frighten or transgress but because they think. They propose themselves as a series of imponderable questions : What is what ? Whose face? What word ? Are they alive ? Can I go there ? Have I already been there ? Sack has said that what he does is not concerned with photography, and I take this to be true in the same way that Augustine might have said that what he did was not concerned with Philosophy. It is concerned with the ultimate nature of reality and the possibility of its apprehension.

The great intellectual project of the late Middle ages was to reconcile the notion of ideal forms with that of entelechy, or the principle of becoming. The world might be an imperfect copy of some higher reality, or the world might be an ongoing realization of its essential nature. Plato or Aristotle. If you think the opposition is arcane or the project antiquarian, ask yourself how it is possible to love a person at the beginning and end of life ? Which is truer, more real?

It is no accident that Sack, American born and raised, found his artistic and spiritual home in the low countries (Brussels in particular), where the Middle Ages took so long to wane. He has pursued his investigations through more than distinct series, defined more or less by the objects : tombstone surfaces, coin faces, bird droppings, gargoyles, burnt matches, the backs of antique prints (Buffon's Natural History), stereographs joined together. This incongruous catalogue embodies a single desire to reconcile the experience of some absolute actuality with a world in the constant process of loss and change. He seeks to pierce the darkness of Plato's cave with Aristotle's lap (the camera).

Sack's art is not one of mystification but clarification, so it is important to know what we are looking at. That is not always evident because many pictures are taken in extreme close up. It is also important to know their circumstances, which are rich in suggestion. For Sack the philosopher, there is no such thing as an esthetic object to response, per se. The photograph is an outcome of the process of symbolic understanding remembering and recognition. The alchemical ingredient, the transforming revealing agent, like acid on the engraver's plate, is time.

I want to think about a few of these series. Sack's tombstones are postcards from the dead that time has intercepted by an image of the deceased, but if maintenance payments are not made, the message may be chipped off and the stone reused. Images are fractured and faded, effaced, superseded, and lost again? The dead crowd each other for recognition and remembrance in vain. Sack remark in an interview that each object is destroyed according to its being - a very medieval formulation. what is the gravestone's being? A memory without details . We are close to some ideal I, some pure form of longing nested in the decay, and in us.

This deep connection between min and world is not a given? The recognition has to unfold. When Sack comes into a place he has to wait until he is no longer a tourist, until he can see and intuit the resonances. Then he has to wait even longer, for an event - a hailstorm for example - to force what he wishes for to "appear in sight out of its secret place, as Augustine says of memory.

The gargoyles are not dreams, or metaphors. They are glimpses of an underlying (I am tempted to say living) reality. Once quasi-magical representations animated y belief, over time they became decorative ornaments, and finally psychological symbols, ignored and inert - until Sack peeked at them through q microscope and discovered their true nature? He managed to take pictures of the very force that called them into being, a force of devotional excess. It slumbers in us but has not departed, and so we can see that there creatures live and wait to be invoked.

One of the most fortuitous events of Sack's recent career was his acquaintance with prints made under the direction of the eighteenth century naturalist Comte de Buffon. The images of Natural History formed a summa biologica of living forms, human and animal, and marked a high point of rationalist categorization and early natural science. Many of them, however, were based on hearsay and fantastic testimony. When Sack turned the prints over and discovered shadowy outlines where ink had bled through he surprised the creatures of the imagination. Emptied of their " scientific " information, the beautiful, shadowy forms emerge straight from the metaphysical Garden of Eden, where all things are known and named for the first time.

For me, Sack's most resonant images are the least " photographic", where his camera has hardly intervened at all : the stereograph series. The original pairs of nearly identical images would have been positioned in a viewer to give a three dimensional view of a scene. Sack joins them in a single plane, creating strange mirrored landscapes and cityscapes - dreamscapes, if you like, although I prefer to see them as places I might once have been and forgotten. Sack selected just a few from thousands he looked at. This process of selection is the key. The first act of being is to respond to setting. Ever special place stirs an intuition of home.

The world is a wilderness of manifestation, analogies. Where do we look for truth, for the confirmation that we have been and are? In the broken image on a tombstone or in the face of our remembrance our grief? In the tree or the totem it becomes (through burning, illumination)? In the animals we are losing or the shadow animals of imagination? In places we have been or those we dream of and desire ? We are doubled in a cosmic

mirror, and we must attend to the moment when the two become one. With Stephen Sack, we keep watch and learn to be patient.

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