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What Does It Mean to Have a Beautiful Way of Seeing?

by Len Bernstein

Can a photography exhibit change your life? I believe it can, and the thrilling evidence is in the new show at the Terrain Gallery in Manhattan, "This Great, Diverse City: How Should We See It? Contemporary Photographs of New York City." It should be at the top of your list of things to see because it shows the beauty of New York City as never before, and is sure to make for some big, proud emotions you won't want to miss. And if you can't get to Manhattan you can see this wonderful show on the gallery's website: www.terraingallery.org

The Terrain is important in the history of art for two reasons. First, since its opening in 1955, its basis has been this landmark principle of the education Aesthetic Realism, stated by its founder Eli Siegel: "All Beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." Second, as the New York Times noted, the Terrain "held one of the first exhibitions honoring photography as fine art." The Terrain writes in the exhibition announcement:

Through images in black and white and color, and comment by the photographers, this grand, historic city is shown as having "a oneness of quiet and tumult, profundities and mischief," as Eli Siegel...said in his talk *What of New York and Poetry?* "You can use a point to get to the whole world, and New York," he said, "is a good place to begin to be fair to reality as such."

Consider this surprising photograph by Dennis Clerkin.



He writes in his comment, "There is profundity in the expressions of these young men looking up with the radiant light on their faces. You could easily think they were in church instead of enjoying a ballgame at Yankee Stadium anxiously awaiting the result of a play that is taking place on the field."

Here too, a particular moment is captured for all time. And these opposites of the momentary and permanent—which all of us are affected by—are central to photography as an art form. So much of what happens in this world, including what we might ordinarily pass by unnoticed, can be given lasting, beautiful form we can appreciate every time we look at it, and you will see diverse and stirring examples of this on the walls of the Terrain. There are scenes of Central Park by John Stern that are intimate and grand. In Michelle Rick's color portrait "Smoke Break, Stoop," we feel the hot reds and cool greens that predominate a young woman's surroundings, convey something of the depth of her thought. There is Dan McClung's plump, yet dignified seagull, against the blue water of New York Harbor with "meaningful Ellis Island in the distance." And there is Adam Isler's photograph of a father and his children in a subway car, of which he writes, "the father's slightly menacing glare at the camera is belied by the tenderness of the children's heads upon his knees."

One of my photographs that I'm proud to have in this show was taken one Sunday morning as I was leaving the subway and saw a triangle of light piercing the darkness.



Then this woman appeared. She had the straight lines and angles of her surroundings, and curves that seemed to complete them. She came from below, walking with grace and determination out of the depths of a New York City subway station. Seen from the back in silhouette, her form is impersonal, and I felt she stands for humanity making its way from darkness into light.

People have seen art as an escape from the “real” world. But art stands for how we should look at every situation, object, loved one, and the next stranger we meet. It is the one effective opposition to contempt—the desire to make less of people and things—that most weakens our lives, and it makes for the happiness and self-respect we are hoping to have at any age. As a photographer and teacher of the art I love, I know that the principle of beauty that is the basis of this grand photography show can enable a person to be not only a more perceptive photographer, but a kinder, more integrated person as well.

You can visit the Terrain Gallery at 141 Greene Street, NYC 10012, Gallery Hours: Wed - Fri 12-5; Sat 12 - 4, Tel. 212.777.4490.

Len Bernstein's photographs are in private and public collections, including The Library of Congress, and Bibliothèque nationale de France. His articles have been published in the U.S. and abroad and he has taught workshops at many high schools and colleges, including The University of Northampton, England.