Peppers from Heaven

A retrospective commemorates Edward Weston's fabled career

What photographer satisfied the biographical requirements for an artist better than Edward Weston? Like Gauguin, he made a mid-life lunge for the southern latitudes, putting family and studio on hold while he pondered the cactus in Mexico. His "commercial" portrait work he churned out with contempt, all but using one hand to press the shutter and the other to hold his nose. And among his remarkable inventory of lovers were the kind of women who not only danced naked for his camera but brought along their own finger cymbals.

Weston's life, no less than his art, made him one of the fabled figures in American photography. His grumpy, exalted journals, published after his death under the title *Daybooks*, are full of aesthetic transports and sexual interludes. But they also show another side of his temperament, a no-nonsense sobriety that he called upon to achieve the condensed art of his mature years, when his aims were both clear and complex: "To photograph a rock, have it look like a rock, but be more than a rock."

The centennial of Weston's birth this year is being marked by three museum shows. The J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, Calif., will exhibit 45 of his pictures later this month. Sixty are going up in December at the Art Institute of Chicago. But the real Weston juggernaut opened earlier this month at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: a sweeping retrospective of 237 prints. Organized by the University of Arizona's Center for Creative Photography and selected by Beaumont Newhall, the gray eminence of photo history, the exhibition will run in San Francisco through Feb. 15, then travel over the next two years to a dozen other cities, including New York, Washington, Los Angeles and Atlanta.

The dual nature unified in Weston's work was evident early in his life. He was 20 when he left his home in a Chicago suburb to visit a sister living in a quiet town near Los Angeles. Eventually he was married there, established a portrait business and fathered the four sons whom he loved fiercely all his life. But a part of him resisted domestication just as fiercely. He found his friends and lovers among the pioneer enclaves of the West Coast counterculture, artic dwellers who shared his penchant for vegetarianism and modern art.

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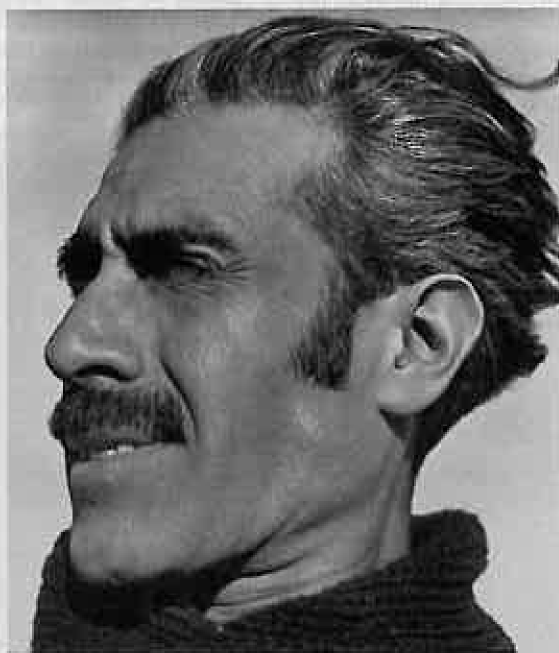
CABBAGE LEAF

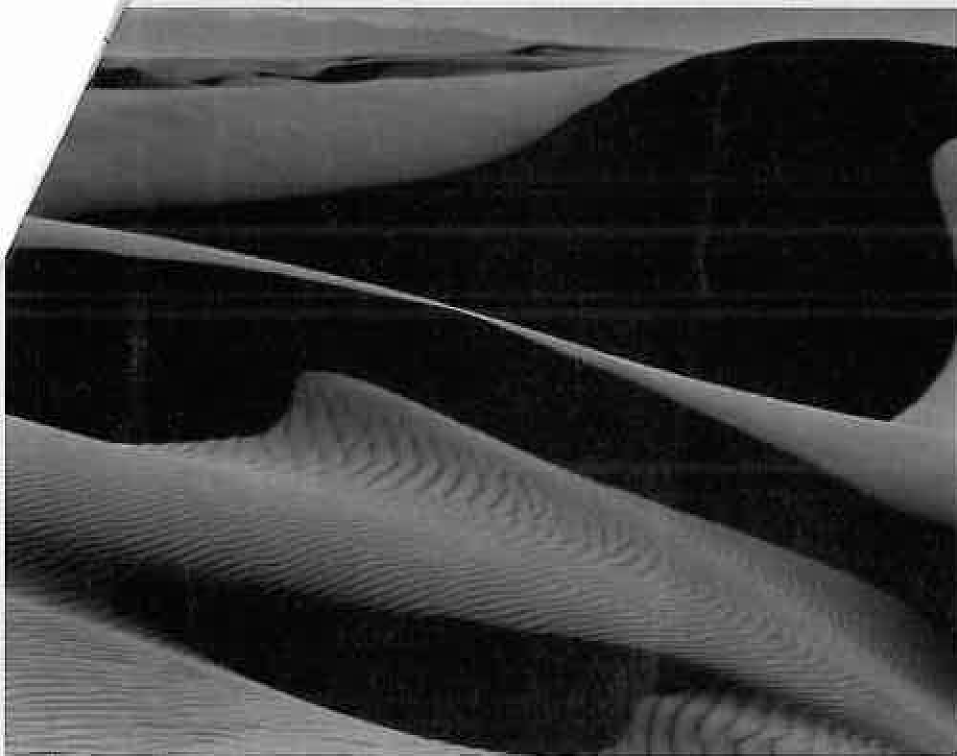
Weston was among the generation of photographers whose conversion to sharp focus from soft-edged pictorialism was the hinge on which the rest of the century's camerawork would turn. By the early 1920s he had already established an international reputation for mildly swoony images in gray-beige tones. He had also grown restless with pictorialism, which took its inspiration from impressionism, symbolism and the damper moments of Whistler. In time, he found a new expressive vocabulary in the angles and hard lines of constructivism and cubism, which he matched to a new photographic method. The focus was sharp. The prints were made directly from the negative, without an enlarger. The chemical manipulations that produced the soulful fogs of pictorialism were forgotten.

With his peerless instinct for composition, Weston could soon reconfigure the female nude to find the fracture lines of Braque or the seamless forms of Brancusi. But it took a personal and artistic crisis in 1923 to push him beyond ingenious deployments of volume and line. He took off for Mexico with his lover Tina Modotti and one of his sons. He spent the next three years rubbing shoulders with the muralist Diego Rivera, dodging the postrevolutionary turmoil and making pictures under the Mexican sun that specifies every object it falls upon. Among them were a series of vivid head shots, like his startling portrait of *Manuel Hernández Galván*, 1924, that use the subjects' plain vitality to confound the impassivity one expects from monumental figures. The Mexican portraits show that Weston had absorbed the principles delivered to him by Alfred Stieglitz, words that Weston later summarized as a "maximum of detail with a maximum of simplification."



MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ GALVÁN

When he got back to California, he began to apply those lessons to his famous studies of nautilus shells and vegetables, using four-hour exposures to draw in every crevice and gleam of some resounding larger form. These pictures were a watershed for Weston. The pictorialists used soft focus for atmospheric purposes but also as a way to make the



DUNES, OCEANO

particular stand for the general. With these radiant close-ups, Weston kept their goal but reversed the approach, bearing down on the details as a new way to make the mundane suggest the divine. At first glance, the scientific exactness of his still lifes makes them look as though they were descended from the nature sketches of Albrecht Dürer. But in ambition they were more akin to the work of the European abstractionist painters. Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian wanted not only to wipe clean the slate of Western art but to scrub consciousness itself, clearing it of worldly distractions as a way of opening it up to the beyond. Though Weston kept some distance from the California versions of Theosophy and Zen, he too regarded his still lifes as more than just worthy forms. They were conduits of spirit: peppers, to be sure, but also the portals of heaven.

The forward-looking sectors of the American art audience were waiting for pictures like these, sensuous and sharp, which spoke to the intuitions of transcendentalism in the up-to-the-minute terms of the machine age. For all their shimmer, they had a just-the-facts quality that proposed the romantic impulse as the highest form of lucidity. (That they could also be sexually voluptuous, something Weston claimed was unintended, did not hurt.) What he had hit upon, of course, was how high definition and distortions of scale could make objects more uncanny even as it made them more palpable. For all its optical truthfulness, Weston's 1931 *Cabbage Leaf* is as dreamlike as an apple by Magritte.

When Weston migrated up the Pacific Coast to settle in Carmel, Calif., in 1929, the rocky beaches and cypress clumps of nearby Point Lobos gave him the opportunity for landscapes with the same subtle subtext. In his profusions of sand, foam and bark, every formation is duly itemized, yet every detail seems an accessory to some great central fact. He consolidated his attachment to nature in a way that may have helped to deepen his friendship with Ansel Adams, whom he had met a few years before. Not far from Carmel he also discovered the stretches of undulating sand that prompted some of his most riveting images. The bays of shadow and light that swell across *Dunes, Oceano*, 1936, are tethered to real landscape by the line of mountains dimly visible in the upper left. In a decade when many American painters found abstraction too remote from earthly matters, Weston could demonstrate that the abstract was simply the last outpost of the tangible. In the same year, he made his celebrated rear view *Nude* of Charis Wilson, soon to be his second wife, stretched out across the dunes. Putting aside the ingenuity of his earlier nudes, he achieved a triumph of straightforward reckoning: being meets nothingness, with the outcome unspecified.

There has been no end of comment on the links of temperament connecting Weston to Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. It was this strand of his work—nature as a hall of mirrors for the soul—that was taken up in the postwar era by such photographers as Minor White, Paul Caponigro, Wynn Bullock and Weston's son Brett. It proved durable enough, but by the time Weston died in 1958 of Parkinson's disease, which a decade earlier had put a stop to his work, the themes that had sustained his kind of photography were showing signs of fatigue. In the following year, even as Weston's reputation stood at the pinnacle from which it has never descended, Robert Frank published the U.S. edition of *The Americans*, a galvanizing portrait of the national life seen in an unlovely light. The book quickened an emerging mood in the camera world. Weston's vision would have less to offer to photographers making glum observations of the American scene and complicated ironies about picture taking. His work has no roadside incidents, no unforeseen elements, no downtown. But the San Francisco show is a reminder of his photographs' unique confidence, force and completeness. Seen today, in a time of crayoned prints, tableaux arranged for the camera and photographs about photography, they bear the stamp of a grand and lucid purpose. —*By Richard Lacayo*

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