



William B. Giles
Tumbleweed, Nt. White Sands, N.M. 1973

William B. Giles

31 October - 9 December

Artist's reception

Wednesday 1 November 7:30-9:30

(The following is an essay written by Bill Giles on the subject of "Exploring the Visual Experience", ED.)

EXPLORING THE VISUAL EXPERIENCE

Tentative beginnings...

Introspection without the right tools can only lead to further daydreaming. Daydreams, in turn, keep us asleep within a magic circle that prevents us from either seeing the real world or ourselves. Through discipline based on respect, not fear, one may slowly begin again. A glimpse of our true self if ever so slight, is, in itself, the beginning of any true venture. Once sensed, one has the possibility of beginning anew, this time with an intention of making one's small hunk of clay a little more meaningful. Like a child learning how to crawl, the struggle with one's entire body is reengaged, and through it, a will is reborn with infinite patience and much love. The re-discovery of this unwieldy lump of clay is again ex-

plored. Love, denuded from its sentimental embroidery has always been a fighting work. It helps feed one's confidence with the proper nourishment to voluntarily suffer the unendurable. Armed thus with gentle skills, one places oneself in a better vantage point of seeing and giving tangible form to the invisible. The discovery of oneself can then be made concurrently with the discovery of the world outside. Reality has always been greater than our dreams, yet it is within ourselves that we find the clues to reality.

The ultimate and most holy test of theory has always been action. Action interrupts the automatic flow of our mesmerized conscious and forces us to confront ourselves. It returns us to the world of appearances, but this time with a more total body-sense, an eye-heart-mind that sees surface, beyond surface, and then back to surface, as a circular flash beyond logic or matter originating from roots deeply laid in the heritage of

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man, and now long forgotten. Today, what was once common knowledge 3,000 years ago is once again being rediscovered in nuclear physics, that structure is illusion, and space proportional to one's consciousness.

In this conscious act be it art or science, one can touch all other things that are also struggling; other men, other situations, ideas, trees, mountains, rocks. The world once again becomes real because one is struggling with one's real self. The outward pressures of personality are lessened and one's essence is given a chance to breath. The task of becoming possible human being is porportional to the amount of darkness one can stomach within one's mind-body and transform into light. The need for skills are paramount - but delicate skills based on one's self-need and not fear. To work with and through these skills will cause one's innermost nature to merge with the nature of the material worked upon and therefore enlarge the circle from within and without. From the blind worm in the depths of the ocean to the endless arena of the galaxies, a cry for this kind of recognition runs through them and us.

This is our Epoch - we are not given a choice. It descends on men and women in whatever form it wishes, if he or she is alive to it. It may take the form of love, as a dance, total catastrophe, a religion. It does not ask our permission. It cries out the call to adventure to all those who wish to be bent to its cause. It confronts us in our sleep, and demands we throw away this magic circle so as to be born again. To act now has its own inherent intelligence - it kneads one's flesh and brains together in the bowels of one's body so as to give it a form, a face. This is our age - this is our clay. What happens, depends upon us. The ultimate and most holy form of theory has always been action. ■

Interview

DF-How difficult is it to verbalize the visual experience?

WBG-Well it's very hard for me because I see so much faster than the written word. The written word you have to think about.. and seeing you simply see. What you see in a flash visually might take days to write about. We need to study what vision is. How the eye sees, not so much anatomically, but psychologically. What would it be like if we were suddenly blind? We need basic research into basic seeing, starting when the baby first opens its eyes, seeing an object, as Walt Whitman once wrote, and becoming that object for a day, a year, a life or cycles of lifetime. What does hearing have to do with vision? What effect does touching have on our seeing, tasting, smelling? We need to humanize our robot eyes so we can bring ourselves into their spectrum, if not with our physical eyes, then with inner eyes so we can touch what we can see on an extended level. Exploring the visual experience came from teaching at the University of Rochester where I was giving a preceptorial, limited to ten freshmen students. They were hand picked for this particular course. The course was called "Exploring the Visual Experience", and there were various assignments given. Out of which that write up was a culmination of the end.

DF-To what extent do you owe your recent interest in color?

WBG-Well I have always seen color and have always interpreted color in terms of black and white. My ability to read color has been derived from just a whole combination of past masters, Ansel's zone system and Minor's way of approaching black-and-white photography.

DF-Are you planning on doing any color photography?

WBG-Yes, I'm starting already.

DF-To what degree are your pictures autobiographical?

WBG-I think they are all autobiographical. The only time when I was doing things that were not autobiographical was probably doing chauffer licenese's and working for the U.S.D.A. at Cornell, in '52, '53, '54. I was using the camera as a record device.

DF-Do you feel that your work explores current art ideas or are they illustrations for thoughts?

WBG-They are more illustrations for current thoughts, rather than making an explanation of something that I

would talk about, they are more on an intuitive level rather than verbal or semantic or intellectual.

DF-How would you describe style and your use of it?

WBG-Well, I think style for me always seems to come through the back door, nothing that consciously would say, "This is a picture that Bill Giles would take." The picture kind of presents itself and style comes as sort of an after thought. Style often evolves through a period of time, friends, and associations that I make after the fact.

DF-What would you answer to people who categorize you as a landscape photographer?

WBG-Well, I would call the photographs I make inner-landscapes rather than landscapes as such. I mean, the way I feel about it is that, there are many rooms in this body that I'm living in, and I have only discovered, maybe two in God knows how many. I am in a galaxie of rooms.

DF-To what extent does the theory of Alfred Steiglitz's "Equivalence" (using a photograph to evoke an emotion unrelated to its subject matter) have on the development of your photographic vision?

WBG-To a large extent. I would agree with Steiglitz. All my photographs are "equivalents."

WBG-What I have been doing in "Transformations" is choosing photographs that evoke a sense of music. I feel there is a very strong relationship between music and photography. If something is flowing, and is integrated, such as a Bach fugue, I am drawn to it. I also feel there is a very strong relationship between sound and light. It is on an emotional basis that connections are made.

DF-It's my understanding that Minor White instructed students to spend time mediating and becoming involved with the environment before photographing. As one of his former students, did you ever participate in this exercise?

WBG-Oh God, I have been doing that since I was three years old. Minor was a good teacher. He said, "this is what you can do with the camera." I owe a lot to him for being able to use the camera as a conscious tool. I have always photographed in a meditative manner. Way back in the 1950's show at Russ Reeds' Gallery with Nathan Lyon, Minor White and Paul Caponigro called "Photography as an Art", I wrote, "be quiet within and let the outer world speak." That was before I really met Minor.

DF-Can you describe any influences that Zen philosophy may have had on your present attitude?

WBG-Well, I have been influenced by Sasakiroshi and the Lama Foundation put out a book called Budha is the Center of Gravity. My main influence has been Nature.

DF-From what source does your Mother of Pearls portfolio get its name?

WBG-Mother of Pearls came from going down to the ocean. Part of the name comes from the mothering effect of earth, sky and ocean. Pearls comes from my vision of getting particularly in focus with what I was looking for. Because what I was going after were real precious images. I guess what I was going for was a quality of light.

DF-Let's talk about scale. How do you see the small delicate and intimate photographs in your Mother of Pearls portfolio (image size-3 5/8" X 4 5/8") compared to your larger 20"X24" prints?

WBG-Between the small print and the large print - even though they are the same picture - it's a different picture because of the scale. With the small one, the distance between the image and the viewer could be 4 to 5 inches. This kind of builds up a person focal length, since the eye is really like a camera. It is very intimate, it is like looking at ones finger print. You have to give them time, because if you blink at the wrong time - that is it. You have to give your concentration to it in order to get anything out of it. Once you do, another whole world enters. Now, with a large image, it kind of splashes you without you even being aware of it. They are so large they are almost like Nature itself. Because of its size you can walk into the picture at three

feet. The esthetic distance isn't as close and intimate. The small ones are more of a discovery. The large ones are like more of a revealed moment in time and space. It becomes the difference between a stamp and a mural. The scale definitely alters the original vision.

DF-How much are you previsualizing?

WBG-Well, I really don't like that word. I only rarely see a picture finished. It's more of a gradual unfolding process, I allow the forms, the composition, the lines, the textures, and the colors to move me; to find its picture. So, I am not sure who is previsualizing who. I don't have a thing in my mind and then go out and photograph that thing in my mind.

DF- Do you find yourself constantly being drawn to a specific kind of subject matter?

WBG-I want what I produce to be an affirmation of my feelings for light. I don't take my eyes for granted. There is something exciting about visiting places that have been here for a long time, Machu Picchu is one of these places. Part of this excitement is identifying with the forms that just simply are. We interpret them differently. I like to go to the source.

DF-What is the story behind your photograph of the screech owl?

WBG-As I was driving along Highway 1 in California, I noticed a car had hit a flying bird. I stopped my car to see what had happened. I picked the bird up and moved it to the side of the road. I wrapped it up in my photographic black felt because it was frightened, hurt and floundering. The bird against the black cloth looked peculiarly beautiful. I got my camera and set up for a photograph, as I thought the bird had just died. It appeared beautiful, I sensed a kind of fire that the ruffled feathers had had. The bird was crumpled and folded. I thought I would take a picture and bury it. After I had gotten everything all set, it, all of a sudden took this huge breath and spread its wings, and stared straight at me. I was so astonished that I could not remember if I took the picture. I looked and noticed that the shutter had been released. Somehow, I felt I had something. That heroic image stretching out and giving its last breath or cry, if you will, represented some kind of deep recognition of something in me

at the time. I had just changed from being a professor to an itinerate photographer. Not knowing if my choice had been the right one, this image became a huge affirmation of this change.

DF-Currently you are giving presentations around the country called "TRANSFORMATIONS." This has to do with creating a third image. This is achieved by superimposing an existing image over a second image in slide form. There is also an audio accompaniment. Could you tell us about the idea behind "TRANSFORMATION?"

WBG-Well, the closest I can talk about it, is to make a parallel with Jung's synchronism, that two unassociated events occurring at a similar time do create an engaging juxtaposition that gives ones a new vantage point for each of those isolated events, (and somehow) some kind of causal relationship is formed.

DF-Jung also states, "out of a playful movement of elements whose interrelations are not immediately apparent, patterns arise which an observant and critical intellect can only evaluate afterwards. The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the objects it loves." He further goes on to say, "art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument."

WBG-That's lovely, really lovely.

DF-Would you agree with Paul Strand's statement that, "all good art is abstract in its structure?"

WBG-What I would define as art, if you want to deal with generalities, is any person who focuses all their attentions on one thing, and whatever comes out of that concentration is an art. One of the things, I am interested in, and, I am also writing an article on it, called "Snapshots of the Mind", is trying to find out the different levels of perceiving any given thing. I think there is a relationship in the documentary type picture to the snapshot, to the equivalent, and to the pictorial image. The object has nothing to do with this relationship, it's the persons projected interest and how they focus on something, the use and content of that which is being seen.

DF-What kinds of books have influenced your thinking?

WBG-I don't think books as much as people. Some of those people are Kazantzakis, Buddah, Monor White, Paul Caponigro, my wife Blake and my children. That's a hard question because there have been many people on on many different levels.

DF-What is the reason for your move from political reportage work to the kind of photographs you are making today, those which demonstrate the beauty and affirmation of life and nature?

WBG-Everything I have done is connected. I don't have to worry about it being connected because, it already is. My level of comprehension always changes. Someone said that if you learn your lessons, your lessons lessen. I look at the past as a way of seeing where I have been. It helps me to go further in the future. It's all integrated, taking Chauffer License portraits was a way of getting me through college. The next step for me was Rochester Institute of Technology. Ralph Hattersley and Minor White were teaching there. They were a super team, one went for the clouds, the other the mud, and they both shook hands on the other end. I met Nathan Lyons. He was doing a workshop so I sat in at his house. It was like the right and left halves of the main working together. I remember working late at the Eastman House with Walter Chappell and looking at the absolutely amazing collection of photographic works they have there. I thing I was influenced by all of it. What it gave me, though, was my amazement to find just how many people did such fine work. The patience, the care, the time, the love - all for the sake of putting something of what each person saw down on paper. I don't ever regret my short apprenticeship to Beaumont Newhall. I don't particularly have historical leanings, but he opened up possibilities and associations I hadn't even thought of.

DF-So it's been a natural progression?

WBG-It's been a very natural progression. There was a time when there was a break in that natural progression. Meeting Eugene Smith definitely brought about a change in my direction. He showed me what kind of commitment was really necessary. I was really heavily involved in photographing the Black movement. Seeing some of his pictures showed me how much further I needed to go in

that particular way of photographing. I lost the faith, I really didn't feel that my photographs could change social conditions by reporting how smelly the arm pit was. So much of my work at that time was very angry. I felt a certain kinship with Lewis Hine when I was documenting police dogs and following Martin Luther King around. It was good to meet a person who had many more years of doing this kind of work. It's war front work, I mean you are right up there getting mugged and being put in jail. I felt that the kind of photographs that I would come out with, people banged and mauled and police dogs charging at people, somehow weren't doing anything. It was all still happening, and I threw a number of cameras away in anger. Gene Smith suggested I study with Dorothea Lange and photograph a different kind of humanity. I then switched over and began photographing things showing things for their beauty. This had a more beneficial - end product for me.

DF-Do you have a life time goal?

WBG-I would put it in the plural - goals. I would like to take my photography into the dimension of creating a completely different reality by showing just the ordinariness of things. I think by putting it into an art form and concentrating on anything, you can make that thing extraordinary, through and by the concentration you give to that object. I am interested in extending the medium and finding new ways of sharing the kind of a visions I see. So I want to go into films, color photography and I want to go to very ancient places. I think there is a lot of value in recording the artifacts of these ancient peoples. These could show that they were perhaps more integrated than we are now. We should not be stomping into the future as if we were the only people who ever lived. We should not cover over values of the past. They are still very applicable in the present. It's in the present that I want to be. I find certain intimacies and levels of comprehension of past stuff that I think would be absolutely stupid to cover over. My eye and my camera are in the service of anyone who feels a sense of a search for things of meanings. The past can be applied to the present and new ways can be found to interpret it. ■

David Fahey is Director of Contemporary Photography at the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery.