

Ansel Adams

A few personal notes about the photographer to accompany a set of personal snapshots taken of him over the years

Bill Jay

For more than thirty years I have been making snapshots of the photographers whom I meet during the normal course of my life in the medium. That has added up to a lot of pictures, the vast majority of which I have never seen except as tiny frames on the contact sheets. I thought it was time to “see what I’ve got”, and to do some serious editing and sorting in order to create a system, if not sense, from the confusion.

I edited the original negatives down to about 3,000 images, scanned them all, added negative numbers and captions, bought a computer dedicated to this project, and a printer deemed to suitable for photo-quality prints, and have begun to learn a whole new way of working. My first experiments started with photographers whose last name began with the letter A. And one of the first names in this scanned group included Ansel Adams.

So here is a small selection of my early efforts - and, as an introduction, some musings which passed through my mind while waiting (and waiting) for images to load, download and do all the mysterious hidden things that computers do deep in the dumb recesses of their hard heads.

Ansel Adams

We all breathe the same air and, in doing so, share in the zeitgeist of the age. On a microcosmic level this tends to promote conformist attitudes, a sort of group-think among humans with shared interests. What exactly is this “stuff” which, when inhaled, nudges us to think alike?

I have no idea - but I do know, often to my dismay, that it affects my thinking on everything. On my attitude to the photographs by Ansel Adams, for example.

I recently saw his major retrospective exhibition of his own selected “best” work from a lifetime of photography. The images were handsomely displayed, large and meticulously crafted, dramatically printed, magnificent examples of a certain kind of work of which he is the undisputed Master. But... I left the show with a feeling of emptiness rather than elevation, of a ho-hum blase disinterest in them as thought-

provoking images. I do believe that the finest pictures first enter the heart, taking time to be carried by the blood to the brain. But these pictures never reached their destination.

I admit to my lack of whole-hearted awe with some trepidation and even a smattering of shame. Ansel invested his work with a lifetime of dedication, passion and commitment. So who am I to negate the results? How churlish to suggest that the results, to me, fall short of intent. How meagre my own accomplishments when matched against such a huge body of work. I feel like a naughty boy in a useless and unjustifiable fit of pique flailing at an indifferent adult.

Yet my own pique at Ansel's work must be acknowledged because it exists. Perhaps it will not seem so petty if I try to understand if not condone it.

Of course, my dissatisfaction could be simply the result of the images' familiarity. Most of them have been exhibited and reproduced so often - ad nauseum - that the old adage might ring true: familiarity breeds (if not, inevitably leads to) contempt. That is part of the problem no doubt. But not all of it.

I think most of my dissatisfaction stems from the tiny little group-think-bits which float around in the air like cold germs waiting to be sucked into host bodies where they fester and spawn common symptoms. I have sucked in the seeds of suspicion about Ansel wafting around the medium in the past decade or two, and breathed out the specks of auto-adulation which was their counterpart during my early years in the medium. Times have changed. The ethos has shifted. The air is different now. Adams' achievement will outlast us all but it is not so relevant to the here and now. He is our past which must be pushed down deep and hard in order to provide a firm platform for the next generation to stand and work. As the saying goes: father's stuff on its way to the attic meets grandfather's on its way down. So wait. Ansel will come back down and reassert his relevancy. But not yet.

Or anytime soon.

There seems to be a correlation between the amount of fame - and emulation masking as adulation - accorded to a photographer during his/her lifetime with the time it takes for that reputation to be tarnished and revived. It works something like this:

The greater the significance and renown of the photographer, the more numerous the acolytes who accelerate the loss of regard and prolong his/her revival. On the basis of this formula Ansel's reputation and its accompanying respect will be delayed longer than would be normally considered reasonable. And perhaps it means that if the legion of mini-Adamses really cherished the reputation of their hero then they would do their cause the greatest service by retiring their large-format cameras, turning their backs on

Big Sur and other similar locales, shedding their backpacks and tearing up their Zone System manuals. Let him die.

I say those words out of respect, not scorn.

Personal notes

I met Ansel on a score or more of occasions during the seventies and eighties and photographed him during a few of the more informal times. He was unfailingly generous, warm, funny, considerate and all the other adjectives you can think of to describe the nicest of human beings - even in the face of rudeness and crude disagreements with his ideas. I vividly remember an annual meeting of the Society for Photographic Education in the mid-seventies which happened to take place at Asilomar, a resort near Ansel's home. He was invited to address the couple of hundred young academic photographers in the audience. He began by stating that the craft of photography was the key to good images - and the audience booed him! What colossal arrogance! But Ansel was more generous than me. He seemed to understand that they were rebelling against the old order, which he acknowledged to represent, and quietly but firmly continued his talk which was a model of sense and sensibility.

Although this public persona was very evident through his innumerable lectures, articles, books and interviews, it was in his private dealings with photographers that his true spirit emerged. He supported, financially as well as spiritually, photographers (W. Eugene Smith, for example) whose work was very different from his own when they were in trouble; he championed photographers from the past (such as Timothy O'Sullivan) and brought their work to light because he loved their images and thought others should be aware of them; he wanted young photographers, after his death, to borrow his negatives and attempt to emulate his results in an effort to learn the craft of fine print-making - an idea that the repository of his negatives, the Center for Creative Photography, has never encouraged, as far as I am aware; he held regular "open house" parties at his home for any passing, stray photographers who might be travelling through the neighborhood, including me, no matter how unknown or inconsequential. Many of my snapshots were taken at these cocktail hour get-togethers.

Let us imagine you arrived at his door for such a party. Ansel might have passed you on your way to the house, driving his Cadillac through the village. You would have noticed a cowboy-hatted gent modestly saluting and acknowledging the waves from the tourists and locals, all of whom know who he is and obviously are proud to have him as a member of their community. By the time you arrive he has entered the house and you have a chance to pass the car. You notice its distinction and the reason it is immediately recognised - its licence plate says ZONE V.

He comes to the door to let you in, with effusive bonhomie and no feelings of “who might you be”. Ansel has been described as a “beaky raven of a man” and the outdoorsy metaphore might have been appropriate when he was lean and black-headed but now he is more rotund and grizzled so you change the description to a “satisfied American eagle of a man”.

Immediately you have been welcomed you are served a large drink, probably gin and tonic, and Ansel comes over to chat. He has an inexhaustable fund of slightly risque stories which he tells with boyish glee. In my picture of him with the drink and cat, he is in the middle of a joke about a tax audit by the IRS and in his enthusiasm he is dripping his drink down his pantsleg, much to the fascination of the cat. He had just heard that his “Moonrise over Hernandez” picture had sold for \$11,000 (which might seem like a bargain by the time this news is read) and he was adding that the more prints he made of this negative the more people wanted one - to that date he had sold over 900 prints from this one negative. The connection between the tax joke and the print sale was not a coincidence - Ansel was laughing all the way to the bank.

So yes, I can feel the zeitgeist manipulating my mind-stuff so that I am less interested in his images that I once was. But that does not diminish the respect in which I hold his memory. Ansel Adams would be an important figure in 20th century photography even if he had never made a picture. He was a teacher, advocate, tireless supporter and champion of photography in general, an amazing promoter of the medium’s status.

Photography owes him an immeasurable debt.

Written for a personal collection of my own portraits of the photographer and not intended for publication, 1998.

