

## Art versus Ideas

*A review of two photographic books: A Book of Books. Photographs by Abelardo Morell. Preface by Nicholson Baker. A Bulfinch Press Book, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 2002; Ex Libris. Ralph Gibson. Photographs and constructs. Powerhouse Books, New York, 2001.*

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In this pair of monographs two highly respected photographers have focused their cameras on the world of books.

But that is where their similarity ends.

Indeed a comparison of these monographs provides a fortuitous (in that they arrived for review at the same time) comparison of very different attitudes towards the role of photographs in books.

Within the band of the photographic spectrum, commonly but misleadingly, termed “documentary” are two distinct approaches. The first approach places emphasis on the single picture. Although the images in such a book might be, and generally are, related by subject matter or theme, each individual picture within the body of work also stands alone as a fully realized visual experience. This is the beads-in-a-jar approach - each bead can be plucked from its context and appreciated by itself.

The second approach diminishes the role of single pictures and places increased emphasis on the totality of the work. The unit, then, is not the single image but the whole set of images functioning as an indivisible body of work, with the sequencing of the images becoming a crucial component of the artistic effort. This is the beads-on-a-string approach - look at one bead and its meaning/significance is inseparably related to those that precede and follow it.

Abelardo Morell exemplifies the first approach. A Book of Books is essentially an exhibition between covers, which Morell concedes in his Acknowledgments: “...where I saw a bunch of book pictures he [his editor at Bulfinch] saw a book of books.” The beautifully reproduced images are printed on right hand pages surrounded by white

paper, while the left hand pages are left blank except for an occasional short quotation from literary sources, such as Browning, Cocteau, Neruda and a few others. The exhibition wall label is represented by a short preface by Nicholson Baker.

In such exhibition-books the ordering of the images is of minor importance; each image is a purely visual experience; the picture might or might not have special appeal depending on the craft of the photographer and the viewer's interest in the subject matter. There is no doubt that Morell has made some stunning images of books, highly detailed large-format pictures photographed by acute raking light which reveals every nuance of texture.

Morell is like a hunter stalking a specific prey. I can imagine him in a library approaching his target, the book to be photographed, with concentration and stealth, altering his distance, viewpoint, angle, until he is presented with the perfect shot: it might be the pattern created by areas of glare on its gilt edges ("Shiny books, 2000") or a single slant of sunshine across a tilted page ("Book of Proverbs for the Blind, 1995") or the stiff vertical grid of upright spines ("Four Old Books, 1995").

Several of these images are destined to be classics - and highly collectible. If I was a book dealer/collector I would invest in the purchase of one or more of these original prints. Not only will they make very appropriate wall displays but also (I would bet my 401K on it) they will rapidly rise in value in the years to come. I would buy from the following list: "Book with wavy pages, 2001"; "Dictionary, 1994"; "Two books, 1994"; "Open Dictionary, 2001"; "Detail of book damaged by water, 2001." An original print by Abelardo Morell will not be cheap because he is already a favorite son of galleries and museums but it will be a surefire investment.

Morell is a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and most of the books which he photographed came from the Boston Athenaeum and the Boston Public Library. My only quibble with this monograph is that I wish he had visited many more of the great international libraries, and edited out the unfortunate still lifes with Lewis Carroll cutouts.

The second approach to photography for books - the body of work as the unit - is the province of Ralph Gibson. Unlike Morell, Gibson "covered" his subject, as photojournalists would say, visiting scores of sites in England, France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Austria, Egypt and the USA. Details of books, handwritten documents, inscriptions, store lettering, engravings and a host of ephemera as well as seemingly unrelated portraits and still lifes are photographed in his inimitable soot-and-whitewash style.

Ralph Gibson is more like a trawler, scooping up images by the net full. The catch is a disparate collection of themes as broad as a "Jesus saves" placard, a watch or a shell held in an open hand, an anatomical engraving, a Roman tablet, a dolmen, a skull, a mask, a tree, a weathervane, or types of type. The quantity of images and their

juxtapositions reverberate endlessly. Even when occasionally focusing on the same subject - the edges of a book - the differences of style between Morell and Gibson are symptomatic. Morell's are careful, cool, clean and classic; Gibson's are gritty, casual, quick and frenetic.

Ex Libris, as the blurb claims, is "a lexicon of signs, letter forms, shapes and images that inducts the viewer to an imaginary ideal library."

Ralph Gibson is one of the few photographers who knows with the passion of a professional the world of books. Since 1970 he has run his own publishing company, Lustrum Press, which issues his own images in book form (beginning with the important monograph, The Somnambulist) as well as selected monographs by other photographers, including Tulsa by Larry Clark. Ex Libris is Gibson's thirtieth monograph.

In all these years, Gibson has learned a lot and this is his most visually and intellectually challenging book to date. But, again unlike Morell's, it is not an easy set of pictures to understand or fully appreciate. The quantity of images, their varied sizing and, most importantly, their careful sequencing demand a great deal of mental application from the reader/viewer. The appeal of this all-or-nothing approach is that speculations about meaning, ideas of association, issues of connections take precedence over the art-appeal of any single picture. This is an approach to the serious photographic book appealing to the thinker, even if the thoughts are ambiguous, tangential and, at the end, elusive and inconclusive.

These two monographs are both excellent examples of their genre. The appeal of one over the other will depend on the proclivities of the viewer: hedonist or philosopher perhaps!