In Plain Sight

The photographs of Beaumont Newhall

Bill Jay

Book review. In Plain Sight, The Photographs of Beaumont Newhall, with a foreword by Ansel Adams, published by Peregrine Smith Books, Layton, Utah, 1983. $27.50

Scholars and artists rarely mix. This is particularly true in the traditional history of art (painting); few of the most important historians and critics are also practicing and respected image makers. The aloof, analytical academic seems such an alien breed from the hands-on, obsessive painter. This has not always been true, of course, but I think it is undeniable that the gulf between art historian and practicing painter is wide, and widening.

It is alarming that such a trend is beginning to appear in the history of photography. Young scholars, fresh from a purely academic training in traditional art history, are beginning to look with avarice at the relatively unknown history of photography. This is "alarming", in my opinion, because the history of photography is rooted in *process*, and an ignorance of the practice of photography can, and often does, lead these style-analyzers into some whopping errors of judgment.

It is no coincidence that the major pioneers of the history of photography - Jerome Harrison, Helmut Gernsheim, John Szarkowski, and, primarily, Beaumont Newhall - have been also respected practitioners of the craft of photography. In photography there is an intimacy of understanding which can only be achieved by a familiarity with its tools, a struggle with its optical, technical and chemical manipulations, a sympathy with the photographer's dilemma of organizing the chaotic flux of life into an ordered harmonious unity with the viewfinder frame.

It is this "intimacy of understanding" with the practice of photography which has permeated, suffused and informed all of Newhall's writings and lectures on the history of photography. This collection of Beaumont Newhall's own photographs, then, is not a minor, if intriguing, set of hobby pictures by someone who has

casually snapped images while creating a reputation in another area of the medium. It is the rites of passage of a continuously dedicated photographer whose images are inextricably a part of, and woven into, the author's scholarly search for meaning in the history of photography. It is irrelevant that Newhall's photographs have only recently been available for a wider audience. (His first one-man exhibition was displayed in 1978). The plates in In Plain Sight, as well as Newhall's own informative and beautifully written introduction, make it abundantly clear that he has been a serious and continuously working photographer since 1926. I was intrigued to discover that 18 of his photographs were issued in a portfolio in the late 1930s, titled Houses of the l840s: Plain and Ornamented. In all the years that I had known and studied with him he had never mentioned this work.

Which brings me to the content of the pictures themselves. Of the 59 plates in the book more than half are continuations of Newhall's interest in architectural subjects. They are reminiscent of the "masters" of the period - Strand, Sheeler, Moholy-Nagy, Stieglitz - or perhaps more indicative of the *zeitgeist* of those times. They are cool, elegant, precisely organized and, as Ansel Adams points out in his foreword, exude *taste*.

More fascinating to me, and I suspect to most viewers, are the portraits of the photographers with whom Newhall has had close relationships over the past 4O years, and the intimate glimpses of the details of their lives, such as "Edward Weston's Coffee Grinder" (1940) or "Charis Weston's Typewriter" (1940) on which we can see the beginnings of Chapter 7 of the manuscript for California and the West. These are not only fine images, constructed with Newhall's penchant for strong graphic design, but also historically intriguing. And for me this is one of the characteristics of good photography; that I feel jealous of the photographer's access to such subject matter.

Fifteen of the 59 plates are portraits of the photographers. They include at-home and at-work glimpses of Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Bill Brandt, Cole Weston, Arthur Siegel, Charles Sheeler and others. In a letter written to his late wife, Nancy, dated 2 February 1944, Beaumont eloquently expressed his credo in portraiture:

> *I 'm after informal pictures of people in their natural surroundings, at ease and so characteristic that recognition of the individual... or type will be instantaneous... I'm after a feeling of hospitality in these pictures, a perfectly natural welcoming of a friend... I want to have in my pictures of*

> *people a vivid sense of participation: I want the viewer to realize that the subject was indeed aware of the camera, but that he neither feared it nor gloated over it, but allowed the photographer to observe him as is - unposed, unpretentious, natural.*

So far, this review has been wholly complimentary. In order to appear an unbiased, objective reporter I have been trying to think of something negative to say about In Plain Sight. The only question which occurs to me is to ask: Would these images have appeared in monograph form if taken by an "unknown"? I doubt it. Yet, even this question seems to me irrelevant. No one else could have taken these images. They represent the marker buoys dropped over the side during a lifetime exploration of the history of photography. As such they are autobiographical. And because the author is such a seminal figure in the medium that fact is its own justification.

Newhall's photographs are not Art, in the contemporary sense of self-indulgently pointing at the artist's own ego. They are not Documents, blandly recording what things, and people, look like. They are something more than each of these alternatives: They are good *photographs*, balancing between ego and information, informing us equally about the subject and the photographer, reminding us that photography, at its best, resides at the interaction between objective fact and subjective feeling.

I do have some quibbles with the production. I would have preferred more images reproduced, at less cost (even at the risk of less fine printing), and presented in
chronological order, rather than separating photographs by theme.

However, In Plain Sight is one of the few recently published photographic books which I have wanted, as opposed to have been obliged, to read and look at.

Published in Artlines,*Vol. 5, No.3, March 1984*