

Jack Stuler

In the Nature of Things

Bill Jay

Jack Stuler is the archetypical practicing photographic artist - which makes him something of an anachronism in this day and age.

All he does, all he wants to do, is make photographs. Everything which distracts from this devotion is suspect; everything which diverts attention, time or energy from the next image is avoided, as much as is humanly possible. And this includes submitting his photographs to galleries and publications. For this reason, Jack Stuler is not only an anachronism but also a role model without followers, an artist without viewers, a prophet walking alone in the desert (literally, as well as figuratively) whom no one heeds.

Until now.

It is astonishing that this is Jack's first monograph after 30 years of steadfast devotion to his art; it would be surprising, and willfully incompetent of the powers-that-be, if this publication did not signal an emergence of Jack Stuler as an international photographer of power and significance.

So why has his work lain fallow for so long? Jack, himself, is to blame if blame there be.

In an age when the clamor for attention is a cacophony and when promotion and self-publicity are taken for granted as the prerequisites of creating a reputation, Jack Stuler quietly, consistently and with singular attention follows his instincts, snuffling truffles hidden by nature, oblivious to the self-serving and narcissistic shouts of the art market.

Jack Stuler is also oblivious of the current critical concerns of photography. I am sure he would agree with Mary Wigman, a turn of the century German dancer, that "strong and convincing art has never arisen from theories." His images arise from what is *not* known. He says: "I look for photographs which reflect the mystery of life. I don't want everything to be pat, to be a formula. I want there to be mystery. I want there to be something in my pictures beyond what we already know. A part of that might be a spiritual search."

It is significant that the only book which Jack Stuler mentions in reference to this work is Herman Hesse's novel, Siddhartha, chronicling a man's lifelong spiritual quest and culminating by the side of a river from which he gained enlightenment. Especially significant are the passages which read:

He saw the face of a fish, of a carp . . . He saw the face of a newly born child, red and full and wrinkles ready to cry. He saw the face of a murderer; at the same moment he saw a criminal kneeling down bound and his head cut off by an executioner. He saw naked bodies of men and women in postures and transports of passionate love. He saw corpses stretched out, still, cold, empty. He saw heads of animals - boars, crocodiles, elephants, oxen, birds.

and:

They all belonged to each other . . . They were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways . . . all of them together was the world.

I think this notion of a life in art having a sense of a search for a personal relationship to truth explains a great deal about the power of Jack Stuler's body of work and about the reasons for its previous neglect.

A spiritual quest is by definition lonely because its primary value is to a singular person, the author. A useful analogy might be the lone sailor, adrift on a vast ocean with no sight of land. An effective way of determining that there is a direction, that the boat is not merely traveling in circles, that progress is being made, is to jettison objects over the side. Then by looking back at this "trail" assurances are gained that indeed there is forward momentum and that future direction can be predicted. He becomes Janus, the two-headed Roman God, who could not look forward without looking back.

In this sense Jack's photographs are marker buoys of a life in progress and are therefore intensely personal, not made with a larger audience in mind. But we are all washed by the same seas. Eventually these images come to rest on our own shore and we recognize them as the marks and scars of someone, "out there" on the ocean, who is experiencing our own worries and wonders. Through photographs we connect lives. This is why, somehow, somewhere, these images will reach the appropriate eyes.

If Jack Stuler has no theory of photography, he also obeys no strictures on how an image should be made or what it should look like. No rules are applied; the process emerges from the subject. This is disconcerting to a critic who needs linear progression and a sense of order before something makes sense. Stuler's body of work has a seeming randomness and disjointedness. He continues to photograph in both black and white and in color, with a straight or purist

approach and a gay abandon to manipulation, employing subject matter as diverse as fish and fog, kelp and guano droppings, soft pornography and the Pacific Ocean, chemical crystallizations and religious paintings, burnt paper and ice formations. He photographed a single stream for 20 years until the encroachment of tourists sullied the peace and made solitude unlikely. He will never return. He spent years photographing the endless permutations of reflections in bent reflective ferrotype sheets. He carried buckets of seaweed from beach to house in masochistic repetition in order to document the changes in form and color in the writhing surfaces. There is no logic at work here, no reason to be obeyed, no response to the medium's imperatives.

It is only when all these diverse images, amassed over 30 years of commitment to photography, are seen in chronological order that the sense of inevitability emerges, like indecipherable pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which connect into the final picture. Any selection from these pieces, therefore, cannot represent the whole, but only proclaim "and so it goes. . .".

Stating his priorities, Jack Stuler has often proclaimed: "Teaching photography is a profession but photography is a lifestyle." It is therefore reasonable to ask what sort of lifestyle does he espouse? On first encounter Jack does not fit the image of photographers projected by movies and novels, those macho men with multi-pocketed vests and a penchant for adventure, whose relationship with women is a continuation of mindless action. Jack Stuler looks more like a benevolent psychologist, with his tweeds, pipe and contemplative demeanor. He is a loner, not a joiner, an eccentric who shuns strife and abhors conflict, who needs equilibrium not chaos. Any disturbance in the calm surface of events upsets him. Literally. And photography is his panacea. If denied the act of making images for any length of time he becomes physically ill. His place of choice is a cabin in a remote area of Arizona where he is surrounded by trees, streams and animals, away from the strife of people in clash and crisis.

So how did this withdrawn, ascetic eccentric become a teacher and what is his relationship to students?

Jack Stuler began his photography while in the Navy during the Korean War. Stationed in Japan, he began to photograph Zen gardens, which only goes to prove the old adage that you never escape the subject which originally drew you to the camera. After demobilization, he attended photography classes on the G. I. Bill and has been teaching (at a university in Arizona) ever since graduation. His only hobby is raising Japanese carp or koi, which of course, he also photographs.

It is this symbiotic relationship between life and work which makes Jack Stuler such an interesting and unusual photographer (and teacher), at least in American fine-art photography.

Disinterested in the latest critical issues and their manifestations in specific styles or subject

matter, he is free to act in an anarchistic manner. But it also means that he does not (cannot) teach in the sense that he has an answer for every question, a lecture for any situation which might arise in the classroom. Rolling out a pat response is not his style.

Instead he does (and can) demonstrate a life well-lived in photography. Students know that if he is not in class then he is in the darkroom; they can expect, when arriving for an early morning class, Jack to emerge from the darkroom with a tray full of new wet prints; they learn only one principle in the form of a question: What does this have to do with your life? "Be yourself" is his only adage. Students learn, by osmosis more than instruction, that photography is not a subject to be studied, not a theory to be applied, not words to be obeyed, but a visual response to a personal relationship with reality.

And that is different, if not heretical, especially when students are encouraged to grab what they can - and then leave and "photograph on your own," away from classes and ideas. He practices what he professes, which is also rare. If acclaim and renown come to Jack Stuler they will arrive, like a knock on the door, unbidden and unexpected. But not unwelcome. He has no aversion to fame but merely and rightly asserts that an active need for it is accompanied by a high price, which he is unwilling to pay.

Quietly, doggedly, with isolation and anonymity, he has been making photographs which chronicle a quest for meaning throughout a lifetime of commitment. That, for Jack Stuler, has been its own reward.

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