

ARCHIVES | 1994

PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW; A Baedeker to America in the Age of Anxiety

By VICKI GOLDBERG

THE SITES OF HUMAN tragedies have been marked for commemoration at least since tradition settled on the place where Christ was crucified. But artists cared more for the events, whether holy or secular, than for their locations -- they painted crucifixions infinitely more often than the hill of Golgotha, just as they preferred martyrdoms or the deaths of generals to a quiet spot that once saw blood.

When photography first came along, it was too slow for most events and had to settle for the sites. In 1855, during the Crimean war, the English photographer Roger Fenton took a picture of the Valley of the Shadow of Death after the killing was over and nothing remained but spent cannonballs. During the American Civil War, photographers unable to stop the action recorded bridges, ruins, "The Scene of General MacPherson's Death" after the general's body was removed. When faster lenses and films were devised, the event itself became primary again, but since photographers are not always in the right place at the right time, the site and its aftermath have been subjects often enough.

Now Joel Sternfeld, in "On This Site . . ." at the Pace/MacGill Gallery on East 57th Street (through Feb. 26), depicts a dozen and a half spots related to bitter events in contemporary America -- the motel in Memphis where Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, the tree in Central Park beneath which Jennifer Levin's body was found. From flowers placed where the founder of an abortion clinic was murdered, to the beach where would-be immigrants from China struggled ashore from the Golden Venture, to the movie theater seat where Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested,

Mr. Sternfeld has devised a Baedeker to America in the age of anxiety, fear and moral crisis. One could argue that American life has been shaped by the events that took place on these largely unsung spots, which form a contour map of contemporary angst.

Mr. Sternfeld writes rather regretfully that Italians put up crosses and small shrines where fatal car accidents occur but Americans leave such tragedies unmarked. Yet inner cities have dedicated whole walls to graffiti of the names (and sometimes the faces) of people murdered there. One of Mr. Sternfeld's own photographs bears this out.

A photographer who has demonstrated a knack for irony and incongruity, Mr. Sternfeld here produces a few fine images with his 8-by-10 camera, but even he cannot make a silk purse of a carport or a tacky meeting hall. Beauty is not his point, of course. The very banality of some of these pictures is a reminder of how indifferent brick, stone and nature are to human tragedy. A tree does not wither because someone is raped and strangled beneath it; a road neither blossoms nor buckles in the wake of a fatal crash.

Behind these images is the age-old idea that places are imbued with the memory of whatever happened there, an idea that has given rise to both shrines and haunted-house stories. Photography helped boost Civil War battlefields to prominence on that list, and some of those fields have been preserved and are reverently visited. (Disney is even promising to recreate the experience at Manassas for those eager to relive the Civil War.) The issue of how much meaning inheres in a place has been chillingly raised by the slow disintegration of what remained at Auschwitz after the Nazis tried to erase the evidence. The question today is whether the camp should be reconstructed or allowed to crumble. What is a fitting memorial to unimaginable horror? What would the place mean if it were unmarked, and how would we read a photograph of it?

Here is where titles and text come in. "On This Site . . ." emphasizes their role, relying unusually heavily on words to provide a context, even a reason for looking at all. The surfaces of these photographs do not disclose their meanings. Because photographs can show but cannot explain, some images, particularly documentary images, are notoriously dependent on words. The face of an unprepossessing young man on a newspaper page, the kind of face the eyes slide over on the street, takes on significance when the caption reads "serial killer."

Photographs are frequently open to multiple interpretations and easily redirected by captions. One well-known example is Margaret Bourke-White's picture of blacks with pails and baskets lined up for assistance after a flood in 1937. Nazi propagandists relabeled it an image of injustice and poverty in America, and no doubt Germans were convinced, for the picture could prove nothing by itself.

Art photographs too can be dependent on textual reinterpretation. Alfred Stieglitz's 1907 "Steerage," often said to be a classic portrayal of immigrants, is not that at all. Stieglitz took this photograph while sailing to Europe; it must be a picture of people returning home after being refused entry to the United States. Then again, Andres Serrano might never have come to Senator Jesse Helms's attention had he titled his photograph "Yellow Christ."

Today some documentary photographers insist on written explanations to insure that their images are not misread. And some artists actually prefer words to images. (Think of Jenny Holzer.) Everyday language is often bonded to images, if only in the mind. Descriptions obviously conjure up pictures. When Mr. Sternfeld writes "Lee Harvey Oswald was sitting in this seat when he was arrested by Dallas Police on Nov. 23, 1963, at 1:50 P.M.," the mind's eye instantly "sees" much more than is in a photograph of movie seats.

The relationship of words to images can be slyly exploited. Several years ago, Larry Johnson showed photographs of famous names printed on fields of strong color -- "Marilyn Monroe," "James Dean." Viewers (or readers) immediately saw portraits in their minds. Glenn Ligon has photographed white words on a black ground: "A photo of a man urinating in another man's mouth." "A photo of a man with a bullwhip inserted in his rectum." Anyone familiar with Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs recalls the images described; the mind in effect develops the photographs.

The Sternfeld photographs may not call up other images, but the explanations do, for events like Rodney King's and Reginald Denny's beatings were massively recorded when they happened. Like stones dropped into the well of memory, the words "Rodney King" and "Reginald Denny" create expanding rings of visual associations -- all of them from photographs or tape. When I see a place identified as the spot where Rodney King was pulled over by the police, I see the beating on tape; when I see the motel balcony where Martin Luther King died, I recall a photograph of people around him on that balcony pointing to the source of the shot.

So much of knowledge and experience is derived from the media that pundits and artists alike concede that contemporary life is a second-hand business. Memory is stocked with photographically generated reproductions, which sometimes have a stronger hold on the mind than first-hand recollections. The media contend not only with personal experience but also with one another for space in the memory bank, and more dramatic or more widely distributed images generally win.

Thus a feature film seen by millions, though its images are fictitious, has an edge over "real" images in the memory (which is why docudramas are dangerous: they are both credible and memorable). In response to Mr. Sternfeld's photograph of the spot where Karen Silkwood's car skidded off the road, I have trouble recalling Silkwood herself, though I have seen many photographs of her. Yet I do remember what Meryl Streep looked like when she played the title role in the film.

If visual fictions can replace documented realities, they can also crowd out the best efforts of the imagination. When I read Kazuo Ishiguro's "Remains of the Day," I had an image of Miss Kenton in my head that the Merchant Ivory film never came near. But Emma Thompson, so vivid, so convincing and so large on screen, muscled her way into my mind and just about erased the woman I had created on my own. My memories of Ishiguro's words are now welded to a celluloid vision, as are my memories of an actual woman named Silkwood.

When it comes to tense moments in the national experience, photographic images are all I ever had. A couple of words for a cue -- "Rodney King," "Reginald Denny" -- and brief segments of tape automatically unreel in the movie palace of the mind, where reruns play on short notice round the clock.

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