

The Case for Joseph Podlesnik as a Contemporary Master

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History of Photography I

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During the turn of the twentieth century, photographers began to explore the inherent strengths of the camera as a means for artistic expression.¹ The movement was called straight photography, and it boldly pushed the medium into a realm never explored before. First popularized by Alfred Stieglitz, straight photography has remained a prominent artform since its invention. When looking at the work of photographer Joseph Podlesnik, one can see that the level of integrity and mastery in his photos rival the very best in history.

A Midwest native, Podlesnik now resides in Phoenix, Arizona, where he works as a visual arts educator.² According to his personal website, Joseph is currently a member of the Visual Arts Adjunct Faculty at Stockton University in New Jersey, and has served as Lead Faculty, Associate Professor of Art Foundations for the Art Institute of Pittsburgh's online division. Prior to his career as a professor, Joseph received his MFA from Cornell, where he studied drawing and painting. According to a 2017 interview with Christina Foard, and MFA candidate from the University of Georgia, the artistic potential of photography became apparent to Joseph once he began using it to teach design fundamentals.³ Joseph explains his practice,

“Through the camera, I’m searching for solutions to formal/compositional and expressive pictorial problems. Regarding ‘seeing,’ for me there’s physiological, mechanical ‘seeing’ (how eyes function and how signals are sent to the brain making optical vision possible); then there’s the psychological aspect of ‘seeing,’ (or attention), which is noticing, attending to and ignoring things, distinguishing between things---seeing “wholes” or gestalts, seeing relationships between event and not just seeing single, isolated, nameable

¹ Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography*, (New York: Abbeville Publishing, 2008), 245-279.

² Joseph Podlesnik, *About*, Joseph Podlesnik. May 6, 2019.
<https://www.josephpodlesnik.com/about-contact>.

³Podlesnik, Joseph. Interviewed by Ziemowit Maj. 2017.

objects. For me, order, harmony, contrast and compositional structure is as important as a documentary use of a camera.”

The complementary relationship between composition and expression provide a clear and direct explanation of Podlesnik’s intentions as well as the intentions of many other photographers and painters. Documenting the world around him, he continues to investigate these aspects without limiting himself in terms of subject, style, or theme. Although, within his collection of photos, some themes can be recognized. One of these is his self-portraits that are obscured and reflected in windows (figure 1).⁴

Pulling into shopping malls, Joseph will walk along with his camera pointing toward the windows. As he walks along, an inter-relationship between three parts eventually appears; one, an interior space (on the other side of the window), two; part of himself reflected, and three; the environment behind him, also reflected. When all of these elements start working together through the viewfinder, a possibility for a photo arises. A surreal world emerges, where silhouettes filled with flowers can stand in impossible, overlapping spaces.

Since Joseph shoots digitally and teaches online, he is well familiar with technology. His Facebook page contains around a dozen albums of his artwork, some containing paintings and drawings, but the majority are photos. The largest and perhaps most notable of these is an album titled, *Phoenix: A Pictorial Journal*. This album contains 1,000 photos from a nearly endless range of subjects. Generally, a minimal amount of editing leads to the final results, but occasionally an effect such as layering may be used. Many times, it seems that the strangeness of a photo could only be produced using digital effects, but upon looking further, one is struck by Joseph’s ability of finding strangeness in the everyday. In a photo posted March 31, 2013, a few people are seen socializing in a hot tub (figure 2). The photo is taken at a crude, almost

⁴ Podlesnik, Joseph. Interviewed by Christina Foard. October 21, 2017.

disorienting angle, but the composition created is strong and memorable. A strange, green light glows beneath the water; an echo of the green glow seen in Degas' paintings of dancers (figure 3). This association is reinforced by the ripples on the water, distorting the figures to resemble an Impressionist pastel drawing. Limbs and areas of flesh contrast the green ground against warm skin tones, solidifying the connection to Degas' dancers. An echo from more than a century ago passes through Joseph's lens, and to our surprise, it has not faded in the least, but has made itself available in a new way.

Joseph Podlesnik's photos generally lie in the vein of straight photography. Other artists and artworks play a role in his creative process, helping him to maintain standards and offering insight into what may be considered picture-worthy.⁵ In an interview with Joseph by Ziemowit Maj, he is asked about what he finds most challenging about the photographic process. He reacts,

“Seeing the world anew, framing it and organizing it in pictures, in inventive ways, which also directly/indirectly communicate my views and thoughts about the world. Pictures, of course, can have connotative power; they're not just black and white or colored patterns - so getting the picture, its formal properties, to support the connotative power of the image is why I'm continuing with it so far. I also try to see photography and pictures as commenting on or reenacting perception itself, rather than serving only as documentation.”

It seems that every photo which Joseph shares contributes to the integrity of the artworld as a whole. Never depending on formula or gimmick, Joseph's process involves looking deeply at the visual relationships in the viewfinder. By doing so, not only the world, but the way which he sees it, is shared with the viewer, to continuously be rediscovered in new ways.

⁵ Podlesnik, Joseph. Interviewed by Ziemowit Maj. 2017.

As with many artists, a few pieces of work stand out in the viewer's memory, for reasons both aesthetic and personal. Of Joseph's photos, one of these, for me, is a specific landscape (figure 4). In this composition, Joseph's sense of design is clearly seen and dominates the rectangle. Matisse, or perhaps, Ellsworth Kelly come to mind when seeing the simplicity, structure, and geometry within this composition. In the photo, two crosses hold a conversation from one corner to their opposites; in the top left, a cross shape is created with two sticks, anchoring the composition and revealing the underlying grid. In its opposite, a shadow from a street sign casts a cross-shape onto a brick wall. Another shadow crudely cuts directly into the bottom-right corner, making obvious the artist's attention to design. A sense of drama is created by the space in between the crosses. Bold verticals create a horizontal rhythm across the space, bringing to mind Matisse's *Bathers by a River* from 1918 (figure 5). When seen side-by-side in reproduction, neither one dominates the other, but both strike the viewer with a sense of revelation and virtuosity. They become permanently fixed in the viewer's memory, serving as reminders of the full communicable potential of painting and photography.

Images, such as the self-portraits and landscapes of Joseph Podlesnik, or the abstract paintings of Matisse, have become much more accessible since the popularization of the internet and social media. Websites like Facebook and Instagram have created new spaces for artists to network and share photos of their work. As the gallery scene in New York steadily declines, a new platform is necessary to serve as the hub of the visual art world. Social media has been especially beneficial for painters and photographers, as they are largely modeled around sharing images and creating conversation around them. These spaces have become especially important to many non-commercial painters and photographers; as their focus is primarily based on creating and developing their work. Selling it is less important, and removing the middleman is

an easy step. Not only can the artist represent themselves and maintain a large audience, but they do not have to deal with the external expectations of working with a gallery.

The commercial success of an artwork and its aesthetic integrity have little relationship to one another. Many of the best painters and photographers often remain on the sidelines of the commercial playing field, devoting themselves instead to producing quality work without the unnecessary burden and distraction of clawing their way through the competition. Joseph Podlesnik is one such example of these artists; he seems to work from a sense of conviction for bettering the world, perhaps as a civil duty, in order to make available to others better ways of seeing the world around them. With that being said, he does exhibit regularly and has works in collections internationally.

It would not be fair to make claims of Podlesnik's success without mention of the front man of photography itself, Henri Cartier-Bresson. Cartier-Bresson was born in Chanteloup-en-Brie, Seine-et-Marne.⁶ Early on in life, Cartier-Bresson showed an inclination toward fine art, being especially fascinated with surrealism. In 1932, his discovery of the Leica camera marked the beginnings of his interest in photography. This came after spending a year in the Ivory Coast in West Africa. The following year, Cartier-Bresson would have his first solo exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City. In 1945, Cartier-Bresson used photography to document the liberation of Paris. Around the same time, he made the film *Le Retour*, partnering with Jean Renoir. Cartier-Bresson is also well known for founding the photographic cooperative, Magnum Photos, along with George Rodger, David Seymour, William Vandivert, and Robert Capa. Before his death in 2004, Cartier-Bresson received many prizes and honors, including honorary doctorates.

⁶ "Henri Cartier-Bresson." Magnum Photos. 2019. May 6, 2019.
<https://www.magnumphotos.com/photographer/henri-cartier-bresson>

Although, not a first-generation straight photographer, Cartier-Bresson's work expresses many ideals of the style. He worked with a sense of composition unmatched by any major photographer prior to him. He is also known as the father of street photography; a way of capturing the day-to-day world, equal to genre painting, but generally shot in the urban landscape. The often candid and spontaneous photos taken by Cartier-Bresson feel direct, honest, and intimate. From time to time, a scene would be staged, but overall, the viewer gains a sense that Cartier-Bresson showed the world around him in a truthful way. Like the master he was, he had a way of revealing the idealism of everyday life.

The same ability to transform the seemingly mundane into magic is thread which ties all of Joseph's work together. When seeing *Asian Festival* (figure 6) side-by-side with a photo taken in Tuscany by Cartier-Bresson (Figure 7), one notices not only the similarities in composition and the masterful arrangement of shapes on a rectangle, but an equal sense of the artist's ability to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary. Artwork of such quality invites the viewer to look deeper into the world around them, and serves as a reminder that the unexpected can be found anywhere.

In the book *Henri Cartier-Bresson: Photographer*, Yves Bonnefoy's recalls a moment with the artist.⁷ While watching Cartier-Bresson snap a photo in public, Bonnefoy is reminded of Herrigel's essay, *Zen in the Art of Archery*. He writes,

"Years ago, in Provence, probably on the summer day when he brought off the astonishing photograph of the covered square at Simaine, I saw Cartier-Bresson whip out his Leica and shoot--- without interrupting a conversation and with a rapid, apparently

⁷ Yves, Bonnefoy. Foreward in *Henri Cartier-Bresson: Photographer*, translated by Frenaye, Frances, 6. Fifth edition. Paris: New York Graphic Society, 1979.

absent-minded glance which did not even take in the camera, as if it were one with his eyes and his whole being.”

Yves continues, equating Cartier-Bresson’s ability to that of a Zen monk,

“This essay... reveals that anyone studying this art under the direction of a true master will be taught no technique and, indeed, will stumble on apparently insoluble contradictions and receive no help. How, for instance, can he simultaneously release the cord and hold back the arrow? But one day he will *know*--- without finding the words to describe it or understand what he has done; from then on with his whole body, with the ends of the thousand antennas we ordinarily retract, he will know that which will enable him to close his eyes, like his silent master, and hit the target, the target which is actually the road within himself to deliverance. The intuition, the serene rapidity, the peace drawn from ceaseless tension--- all these gifts of Cartier-Bresson are extraordinarily close to the spiritual readiness of a Zen monk.”

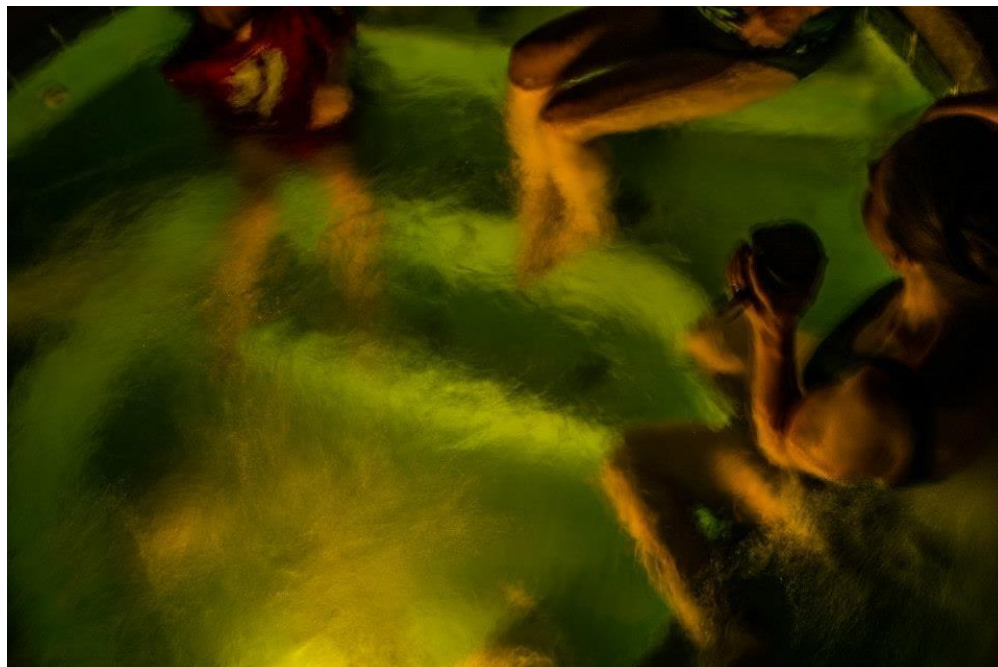
Bonnefoy’s reflection on Herrigel’s essay puts into words that which can also be expressed in a great work of art. In the same way, a certain tension exists between expressing as composing. A contraction; to marry the subjective with the objective, and find that they are only two sides of the same coin; integral aspects of every experience. This is the standard to which Joseph holds himself, and is at the heart of mastery itself. The search for the impossible in the everyday reminds one that by changing them self, by changing their perspective, they are then able to change the world around them.

By examining Podlesnik’s photos side-by-side with works from Matisse, Degas, and Cartier-Bresson, one sees that his compositions hold up to those of artists of historical significance. Podlesnik is able to express and compose in the most profound manner, constantly

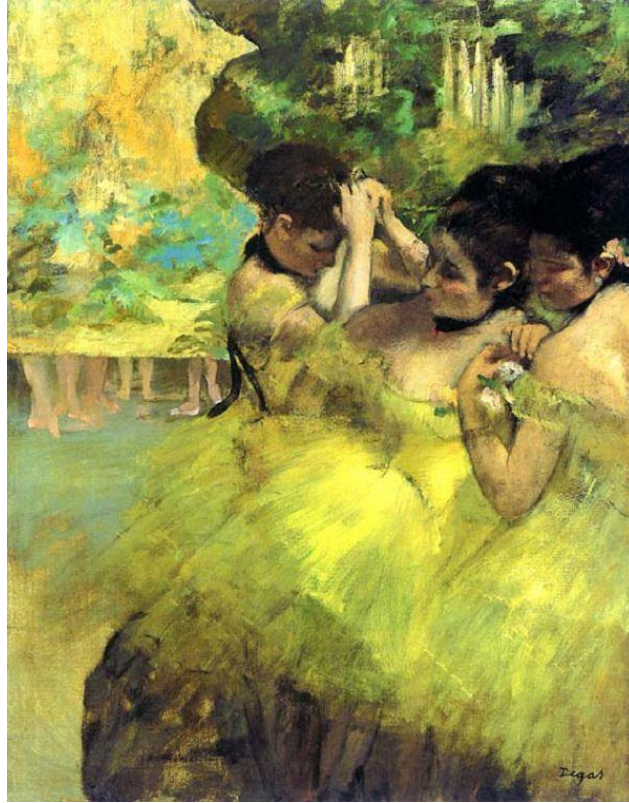
creating images striking in form and glowing with revelation. He carries forth the tradition of photography with the utmost integrity; and encourages all of us to see the world anew.



Podlesnik, Joseph. Untitled. 2018. Courtesy of artist.



Podlesnik. *Night Bathers*. 2013. Courtesy of artist.



Degas, Edgar. *Yellow Dancers*. 1871. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.



Figure 1. Podlesnik. Untitled. 2019. Courtesy of artist.



Figure 2. Matisse, Henri. *Bathers by a River*, 1918. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.



Figure 3. Podlesnik. *Asian Festival*. 2010. Courtesy of artist.



Figure 4. Cartier-Bresson, Henri. Siena, Tuscany, Italy, 1933.

Additional Images:



Podlesnik. *Play*, 2015. Courtesy of artist.



Matisse. *View of Notre Dame*. 1914. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.



Podlesnik. Untitled. 2018. Courtesy of artist.

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