SOMEONE. SOMEWHERE. SORT OF.

©2024 Marvin Heiferman

What does it take to make and what does it mean to focus on out-of-focus images?

We are, the sighted among us, hard-wired to parse photographs quickly. And as we extract data from them, we get what's called the gist of a scene, even if scenes presented to us are less-than-sharp ones. The process happens quickly, in hundredths of milliseconds. Optical and neurological receptors work in tandem to discern edges and shapes, contrast, texture, and color. Patterns are distinguished and spatial relationships computed. Objects, faces and categories of places are identified. Memory is summoned up. Hypotheses get tested. Emotion factors in. Meaning gets made.

Interestingly, though, when resolution is stymied as photographs veer toward the atmospheric or abstract - like the elegant ones presented here so intentionally do – uncertainty kicks in. What you see is, not quite, what you get. We expect photographs to be in focus and if they're not, the assumption is something's gone wrong, a mistake's been made. But Bill Jacobson's photographs, sexy and velvety looking even when they're glare-filled, read and work differently. They toy with expectations and cognitive dissonance. Calm as they appear to be, uncertainty hovers in and about them, a quality that puts viewers to work. Clarity is neither the goal, nor the point here. So, what is?

"An image offers our brain a little voyage of discovery," Pietro Pierona — a professor of electrical engineering, computation and neural systems at California Institute of Technology — has suggested. A photograph offers up "some surprises and visual puzzles to be solved along the way … if it is rich in content at multiple levels of perception." Embracing vagaries – not only of perception and in processing, but of identity, in hereness and thereness, in discerning whether something up ahead is on the verge of fading away – is a strategy worth considering while engaging with these woozy images.

If you've dealt with visual conditions or impairments and had your eyes dilated before an ophthalmological exam, what you encounter here registers as familiar visual territory. If you've strolled or run or driven through fog, if your glasses steam up when you move between environments where temperatures and moisture levels fluctuate, you recognize the look. If you've watched movies or TV shows in which people get hypnotized or ingest knockout drops and rooms start to swirl or where

characters, lost in a desert, see wavering mirages through veils of heat, you get the picture. The same goes if you've seen your share of gauzy perfume ads that once filled the opening pages of certain magazines, before magazines began to fade away, too.

Jacobson started to explore what soft-focus imaging made possible in the late 1980s, responding, in part, to years of rummaging through flea market photographic finds: daguerreotypes, tintypes and snapshots. "There were so many with a diffused, out-of-focus feel," he's said, "I was mesmerized by their beauty, their suggestion of mortality…" In the midst of the AIDS crisis and, perhaps, as an antidote to the sharp resolution he was hired to attain while documenting artworks for museums, galleries and artists, Jacobson reflected on the expressive qualities some images acquire as they vacillate between precision and unreadability, then went on to produce the hauntingly beautiful photographs he would, over the next dozen years, become known for.

That work took a turn in 2005 when, in the process of moving out of the space he'd lived and worked in for twenty years, thoughts about the impermanence of space and experiences in them led Jacobson to make very different, equally evocative, but far more tightly focused images. From 2009 to 2013, his color photographs often featured rectangular boards — some brightly monochrome in tone, others with photographic images on them — leaning against blank interior walls or held aloft outdoors, all of them more than hinting at temporality and absence.

Starting in 2018, working in Virginia, France and then in upstate New York after the global COVID pandemic was declared in 2020, Jacobson returned to making images of equivocal, rather than decisive moments. The flannel-soft, pastoral landscapes look familiar and comfortingly bucolic until, that is, their resolute placelessness kicks in and possibilities of disappearance start reading as distinctly as auras of presence. There are also portraits of solitary people: serene or anticipating someone or something, dressed or undressed, seated in or looking off into space or making their way through it.

The ephemeral nature of these open-ended images summons up spectrums of association. In the late late-nineteenth and early twentieth century and following in the footsteps of the French Impressionists, Photo-Secessionist art photographers (including Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Gertrude Käsebier and Alvin Langdon Coburn) were celebrated for willfully soft-focus photogravures and gum-bichromate prints that represented, according to Charles H. Caffin, a contemporary critic and supporter, "a

movement against the purely objective, against the matter-of-fact…" Since the 1970s, mesmerized amateur and professional picture-makers alike have watched in awe as Polaroid SX-70 instant photographs, mechanically spewed from their cameras and muddled-looking at first, mature out of indistinctness in a matter of minutes. Novelty-seeking, twenty-first century image makers of all sorts were obsessed, for a while, with fooling around with the misty digital effect called "bokeh," named after the Japanese term for blur. Today and on video conferencing platforms like Zoom, meeting participants routinely opt to fuzz out the potentially too-revealing background details of the rooms their webcams show them to be situated in.

When art theorists and cultural historians expound on what they call the "indexicality" of photographs, it's just another, more academic way of acknowledging what people have been marveling over for nearly two hundred years. Light and lenses register "traces" of the universe onto photo-sensitive materials, which makes possible the collection of visual data. That inventorying of things is what has, traditionally, endowed photography with its sense authority. But we're living and making pictures in a new era now. Readily available digital-editing tools and the feverish development of artificial intelligence driven image-generating software not only allow images to be captured in detail, but to be imagined and then word-prompted into being. Still photographic images that zero in and crisply render what's in front of a camera, which invite us to linger over particulars, may be losing their edge as 24/7 image-making, sharing and media access condition us to expect flux, as much as stability, in the representation of experience and events.

That these works so seductively depict personifications and sites of uncertainty is what, largely, accounts for their power and effectiveness. Now in his late sixties, it's not surprising that Jacobson – thinking about transience and impermanence, both on personal and environmental fronts – has circled back to reflect upon the inevitability of comings and goings in images whose pictorial ambivalence evokes liminal moments and transitional states. Rather than doing what photographs are so often called upon to accomplish — secure the present at the very moment it becomes the past, for the future — these photographs more than hint at instability, thresholds and tipping points. They waiver with possibility, rather than land on fact or with certainty. They are suspenseful and hold attention to the way gyroscopes do, as the spinning slows down and they start to teeter. Instability, letting go and loss, the simultaneity of creation and dissolution, are among the subjects that linger here. Which is why

— needing and hoping and longing as many of us do, wanting to hold on to or not let things slip away, for all sorts of reasons — we will keep looking at them.