

Walker Evans. Or Is It?

by MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

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A PHOTOGRAPHER snaps a picture. If it's a camera with film, a negative is made; if it's a digital camera, a file is produced. A printer, in a dark room using chemicals, or at a computer screen, can tinker with the image, crop it, enlarge it, make it lighter or darker, highlight one part or obscure another.

In other words, the image produced by the camera, whether it's a negative or a digital file, is only the matrix for the work of art. It is not the work itself, although if the photographer is a journalist, any hanky-panky in the printing process comes at the potential cost of the picture's integrity. Digital technology has not introduced manipulation into this universe; it has only multiplied the opportunities for mischief.

I dawdle over this familiar ground because the digitally produced prints of classic Walker Evans photographs, now at the UBS Art Gallery, are so seductive and luxurious — velvety, full of rich detail, poster-size in a few cases and generally cinematic — that they raise some basic issues about the nature of photography.

For starters they suggest a simple question, whether luxury and richness are apt qualities for pictures of Depression-era tenant farmers in the American South. These are, I must say, almost uncomfortably beautiful. In "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," where Evans first published many of these photographs in 1941, James Agee, his collaborator, wrote that the book might best have been issued on newsprint to suit the simple and honest character of its subjects. Photography compromises its own value, Agee thought, when it becomes pretentious.

For his part Evans notoriously disdained darkrooms and only haphazardly supervised the making of his own prints. But he adopted the new Polaroid SX-70

camera when it came along in 1973, indicating that he wasn't averse to new technologies; and with his negatives, like most photographers, he occasionally burned in or dodged out passages to make the pictures look more the way he wanted them to, which they couldn't otherwise. To a negative of the famous portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, the sharp-faced Alabama tenant farmer's wife, he attached instructions for exposing furrows in her brow. Adjusting the exposure was the technique he had at hand, a crude one compared to digital technology.

The new Evans prints are made by John Hill, a friend and colleague of Evans's at the Yale School of Art, in collaboration with Sven Martson, who printed photographs for Evans during the 1970's. They use carbon pigments. Evans shot these works on assignment for the Farm Security Administration, so they ended up in the Library of Congress as public property, where anybody now has permission to reproduce them.



Digitally produced prints of classic photographs by Walker Evans, among them "Roadside Stand Near Birmingham" (1936), are now on display at the UBS Art Gallery in New York, raising some basic issues about the nature of photography.

The digital process allows Mr. Hill and Mr. Martson to uncover details embedded in the negatives, outside the tonal range of the old silver gelatin prints: a shadowy girl in the doorway of a roadside stand near Birmingham, Ala.; numbers painted on a telephone pole beside a gas station in Reedsville, W.Va.; penny-picture faces in a window of a photographer's studio in Savannah, Ga. The new prints modulate and unify the midranges of grays in these pictures to soften

contrasts and give a warmer ambience to photographs that were often sharp and austere in Evans's gelatin silver prints. Mr. Hill, who put together the show, includes various books, magazines and prints that Evans supervised, so you can make the comparison yourself.

But does this improve the pictures? No. For one thing, it is not possible to improve on the quality of Evans's originals, only to emulate it. For another, size shifts how we see, both for better and worse. There is a level of concentration required by staring into a small gelatin silver print, a way the image

focuses the mind and stays contained within a narrow field of vision, which is among the pleasures of photography. Bigger pictures are read differently, more piecemeal, in the way that film in a theater is viewed differently from an image on television or on a computer screen. Evans lugged his large-format camera around the rural South during the heat of summer so that he could make pictures containing lots of detail. And for his Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1971 he approved the installation of a few blownup photographs as props.

But a new detail revealed by an enlarged digital print becomes a visual fact that, however subtly, affects the balance of the entire picture. Photography is a seamless medium: a whole, continuous image put together at once, which the eye unconsciously distinguishes from a drawn image that is made inch by inch, or pixel by pixel, in the case of a digital image.

Maybe that's why these new prints have something of the aura of drawings. They are, Mr. Hill makes clear, his interpretations of Evans's work. The effort may summon to mind Sherrie Levine's appropriations of Evans's photographs, which were also conceived as high-end art objects, not commonplace reproductions. But while Ms. Levine trumpeted the inferior, second-hand quality of her copies (which at first sold for more than Evans's vintage prints; go figure), Mr. Hill and Mr. Martson bring to their works the authority of first-hand experience with Evans and an obvious devotion to him.

And this is where the philosophical implications get interesting. Is photography closer to music and theater, or to painting? A painting is what it is, and copies of it are not the same. Music and theater exist through their variety of interpretations. Mr. Hill makes the music argument, not surprisingly.

The tricky part is that a listener knows a musician playing Bach is not Bach. Somebody looking at one of these new Evans prints is likely to assume it is by Evans, which it is of course only up to a point. That point is the threshold of the new technology.

It allows Mr. Hill and Mr. Martson to combine two separate images into a wide panorama of a street scene in Selma, Ala. The stitches are clear, acknowledging the interpretive lark. In other cases, moderate-to-large-scale prints of the Cherokee Parts Store and of Joe's Auto Graveyard in Pennsylvania,

of matching houses with round windows and a Carole Lombard poster on a wall in front of them, and of a small-town main street, crisscrossed by telephone wires — all these prove that Evans's pictures work at any size because they are emblematic and therefore infinitely reproduceable.



"Untitled, Selma, Alabama" (1936), a combination of two images.

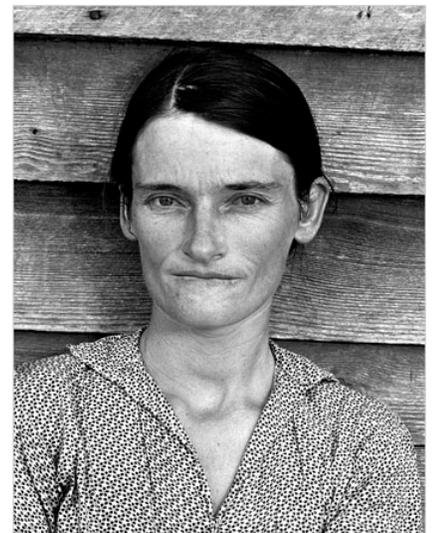
UBS Art Gallery

He combined Hemingway's economy with Cummings's wit and Eliot's urbanity. His laconic scrutiny defined an American visual poetry stripped of Victorian charm and propriety and easy bohemianism. It's there in the rhyming circles of the windows of the houses echoing Lombard's shiner on the poster, in the haphazard geometry of the telephone wires and in the tumble of abandoned Model T's, like tombstones, collected at the base of a grassy hill. The last is akin to one of Brady's Civil War photographs, silent and eternal. Evans's mordant dispassion let him see destitution and the everyday in all its ready-made eloquence, short-circuiting our pity and condescension.

About that famous Allie Mae Burroughs portrait, of which there is a new, sumptuous print and also a billboard-size image in the UBS show, Lionel Trilling pointed out that she "simply refuses to be an object of your 'social consciousness.' She refuses to be an object at all."

These latest prints, beautiful though they are, will no doubt be superseded by further technological inventions claiming to extract still more signs of the artist's genius.

They will come and go. Technology isn't timeless. Evans is.



"Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer's Wife," (1936). UBS Art Gallery

Walker Evans Goes Digital

by Miki Johnson

Published: August 25, 2006

Source: State of the Art: A group blog from the editors of American Photo magazine.

More than 30 years after his death, revered photojournalist Walker Evans has moved into the digital realm.

In "Walker Evans: Carbon and Silver," a deceptively benign exhibition of his work at the UBS Gallery (circumnavigating the lobby of the UBS building at 1285 Ave. of the Americas), gelatin silver prints of Evans's 1935 and '36 photos live alongside what could be considered controversial contemporary prints from the same negatives--reproduced digitally.

Curators John T. Hill and Sven Martson, who both worked with Evans, first procured hi-res scans of Evans's prints and negatives mostly from the Library of Congress (a handful also came from private collections). They then tweaked the digital images to bring out details on both ends of the tonal spectrum and printed them on archive stock. Many of the inkjet prints are large format, revealing tiny details lost in the gelatin silver prints both because of size and the ease of digital manipulation.

Hill especially, who wrote the text for the exhibition's pamphlet, seems to be on the defensive about this practice of posthumous printing, especially from digital files. "To leave a collection of negatives intact suggests a tacit agreement to new printing," he writes in the pamphlet, emphasizing that Evans was never very interested in fine art prints and often pawned printmaking off on assistants.

Instead, Hill suggests, Evans much preferred books as the "ideal format" for his prints, both

because they lived an extended life in the public consciousness and because photo-engravers gave him more control over his images. Hill, who worked with Evans at the Yale University School of Art (which the show was curated for), sees this as evidence that Evans also would have embraced digital technology that provides even more control.

But what are perhaps even more interesting than the juxtaposition of vintage and contemporary prints are the exhibition's detail enlargements, which Hill also carefully justifies. In a tighter crop of Evans's Minstrel Poster, Alabama, 1936, the section torn away to reveal a tiger on an underlying poster grabs your attention, while the original framing pivots on the contrast between the detailed poster and an empty expanse of wall.

At one point in the exhibition pamphlet, Hill compares photographers' negatives to plays or pieces of music, which it would be absurd to say should only be reproduced in the exact style it was written, with period costumes and no updating allowed. He says: "Had Walker Evans been a composer, the prints in this exhibition would represent new arrangements... based on careful study of his intentions but played on new instruments with greater tonal range."

While Michael Kimmelman at NYT today criticized the show's potential to mislead audiences into thinking these are Evans prints, I'm inclined to agree with Hill that posthumous and digital prints should have their day in the fine art court. I understand why Kimmelman is wary--printing has always been part of the process that defined a photographer's artistic vision. But we are already too far into this revolution to sideline it with worrying. Contemporary digital prints have been easy to make for years; it seems inevitable they will eventually find their own place in the gallery scene.



"Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," (1936).

UBS Art Gallery

Instead, my criticism of this show is that, considering Hill's eloquent theoretical underpinnings, it is really a relatively straightforward "arrangement" of Evans's work. Much more a Zeffirelli Romeo and Juliet than a Luhrmann.

The one image that did cross over into genuine interpretation is a street scene created out of two separate photos. Hill explained that each image taken in 1936 Selma, Alabama, was somewhat unremarkable. Put together, the images create a panorama that is exponentially more interesting, not so much because it contains twice the information as because it forces us to put Evans in the photo too.

There he is, standing at his behemoth camera, snapping several similar shots from a static location. Carefully recording some visual information and consciously excluding the rest. In this sea of dispassionate black and whites from America's bleak depression years, this recreated tableaux stands out because it adds a (post)modern dimension to Evans's work. It teaches us something about the photographer by way of his art, rather than through cloying words on a page.



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"Untitled, Selma, Alabama" (1936), a combination of two images.