



## TIME TRAVELING THROUGH TRUTH AND BEAUTY

“Pictorialism and the Photograph As Art: 1845 to 1945”

By William Thomas

*Mesmerized by the Masters? This unusual review of the current Vancouver Art Gallery Exhibition: "Pictorialism And The Photograph As Art: 1845 to 1945" by a professional photographer and former photographic gallery director just might turn you on.*

“You have to see this show,” said the voice on the phone. Never mind the long drive down-island, the hours-long crossing until Vancouver’s skyline rises from the sea like Atlantis... “You can’t miss it.”

Enraptured by photography since my father handed me a Brownie Bullet with the simple instruction to keep the sun over my shoulder – and later turning my obsession into a career that took me from Woodstock, ‘Sixties Black Power marches and anti-war protests to a stint as a “photog” with the *Vancouver Sun*, then across the Pacific under sail all the way to China and Japan, back to B.C. logging blockades and then to Kuwait’s oil-fired hell, and now back to the loveliest isle of all – I knew she was right.

But no matter how rare these first photographs, assembled for the first time at the Vancouver Art Gallery in an exhibition enigmatically titled “TruthBeauty” – I remained wary of these so-called “Pictorialists” with their elaborate artifice of soft-focus lenses, exotic light-sensitive slurries, and printing papers as textured as the artists canvas they sought to emulate. Hadn’t I spent thousands of dollars on the sharpest Leitz and Zeiss lenses, and labored over decades to make prints that elicited startled exclamations with their razor-edge resolution and detail?

I *throw out* my blurry photographs.

The Pictorialists made it a fetish.

And they humbled me.

Hours later, staggering out from that 200 print exhibition onto rain-blurred streets they would have celebrated, I felt dislocated in time and space. After the subdued, monochromatic realms in which I had been immersed, Vancouver's clangorous, multihued reality seemed like a simulation.

Days later, still shaken, I remain haunted by so many images of people – women, men, children – so alive in their aspirations and vitality. Now all dead and dust.

Departed.

Gone.

Yet somehow *still here*, still very much alive in the matrix of a still, evocative milieu that reaches out... and yanks us in, as if we, too, live there.

These prints were so extraordinary, Misha and I went back for another helping.

It's spooky, how these momentary configurations of light and form can reach out 180 years later and imbue us with a sense of time and place more real than the waking dreams we inhabit in our daily lives.

Why not? Drunk on photography, obsessed with octaves of tonality Gurdjieff said leads to the divine, the Pictorialists strove to define and defend a new medium already being overrun by what one early American photo magazine editor termed, "faddish hobbyists."

Their aim: to beat painters at their own game. Using textured papers, exotic emulsions, and other laborious hands-on techniques that could neither be duplicated nor mass produced, the Pictorialists drew from the painterly arts, hoping to imbue their own fledgling field with similar overnight respect.

Instead, they often encountered derision from threatened artists and aficionados. As this photographer and many others can attest, this exclusionist mantra echoes today in galleries often contradictorily draped with dazzling graphics: "Art can't be made with a machine."

Good luck dealing with robots. Try running this "machine racism" on modern photographers whose cameras are already so nearly sentient with chips and sensors, the resulting images have become cybernetic collaborations by Sony, Olympus, Canon, Nikon and other software collaborators.



## STEAM PICTURES

Lest we forget, many famous artists used the newfangled camera obscura to throw reflected images on the canvases they painted. And photography itself – which inserted light-sensitive plates into these same optical devices – was born under the inspired tinkering of scientists as renowned as William Henry Fox Talbot and Sir John Herschel of the Royal Society.

Launched from a ferment of science and high tech, the Industrial Age was literally gathering steam just in time for the invention of photography to record its billowing bluster. Tracing its origins, Douglas McIntyre describes how, in "rising out of the realm of science in 1839, photography was repeatedly heralded as a faithful delineator capable of recording the world in infinite detail. To many, photography was... the discovery of a natural law by which objects could be recorded."

This was a problem for Pictorialists, “who sought recognition of photography as the equal of painting and sculpture among the traditional fine arts,” reiterate Vicki Goldberg and Robert Silberman. Writing on “Photography as Fine Art”, they go on to explain: “Since sharp focus suggested the use of photography as a scientific or at least mundane recording device, soft focus became the sign of poetic artistry and the pursuit of beauty.”



In their revolt against the blindness of precision, Pictorialist photographers employed a variety of emulsions – from salt to egg whites and explosive sodium nitrate – in efforts to expand tonalities in sometimes carefully modulated and often muddy grays. By blurring detail, which they regarded as “distracting”, the Pictorialists claimed to achieve a more “Natural vision” closer to how the eye really perceives.

Perhaps for those with cataracts.

Still, I marveled at the softly focused salted-paper prints made from paper negatives by the Scotsmen David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson between 1843 and 1847. But McIntyre reminds us that they were “compared unfavourably” with the astonishingly detail of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre’s one-off, incapable of being duplicated, daguerreotypes.

### PRETENSE AND PERSISTANCE

The battle was on! Drawing from a style of painting called Tonalism, in which soft light and shadows cloak landscapes in misty veils, the Pictorialists emphasized emotive tonalities over eye-popping banalities. Taking notes in the Vancouver exhibition, McIntyre put it perfectly: “Mrs. Jameson (c. 1845) is not a very good photograph if what we want is information. We cannot see if she has wrinkles. We can see she is wearing rings but we couldn’t identify them for insurance purposes. The exquisite exactness of which photography is uniquely capable is missing. Instead we are presented with a portrait sketch in which broad areas of white appear to be pulled from the shadows. Mrs. Jameson’s force of spirit, rendered in tones rather than in details, is what demands and deserves our attention.” [douglas-mcintyre.com; artcyclopedia.com]

It was easy to discern in this Vancouver retrospective where some of these early visual poets tried too hard to set themselves apart from beady-eyed scientists – and worse, a growing army of “amateurs” armed with dry plates, whose frenzied clicking mocked art and neglected craft in ways grown all the more hideous (some would say sacrilegious) with the advent of “point-and-shoot” digital cameras and PhotoShop’s push-button Pictorialism.

Yet, through the Pictorialist pretense shines a dedication to craft and truth – and something more, something ineffable and profound – a stillness, a sense of dignity and place in prints still with us, but fading fast from today’s instant-gratification, throw-away culture that celebrates superfluous surface glitz and visual promiscuity as a kind of random, “drive-by” art.

You had to be there. And through these prints, you are.

“Photographic Pictorialism was simultaneously a movement, a philosophy, an aesthetic and a style,” exult Alison Nordström and David Wooters in prefacing *TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*. Arising in the mid-nineteenth century as the first global advocate-practitioners of photographic art, “their organizations, publications, exhibitions and competitions established photography as an accepted medium for creative picture making and artistic expression.”

During the first 50 years of photography, it was the Pictorialists’ conscious, critical practice that “offered us our first historical assessment based not on technological advances but on aesthetic evaluations” – sparking a debate that continues unabated in this era of keypad digital affectations. “Most important,” emphasize Nordström and Wooters, “their core assertion that photography could be a vehicle for personal expression — rather than merely a factual description of the world around us — is now a widely accepted idea.”

But lo! Comparing a fine photograph to a masterful painting is not.





## SOMETHING DIFFERENT

It wasn't any easier for photographers to be taken seriously in the 1800s and early 1900s, when "people scoffed at the concept of photography as art," *Vancouver Sun* reporter John Mackie reminds us.

"For the general public, and for art people, the idea that you could make art with a machine was really, really contrary," echoes Nordström. "It was a radical notion."

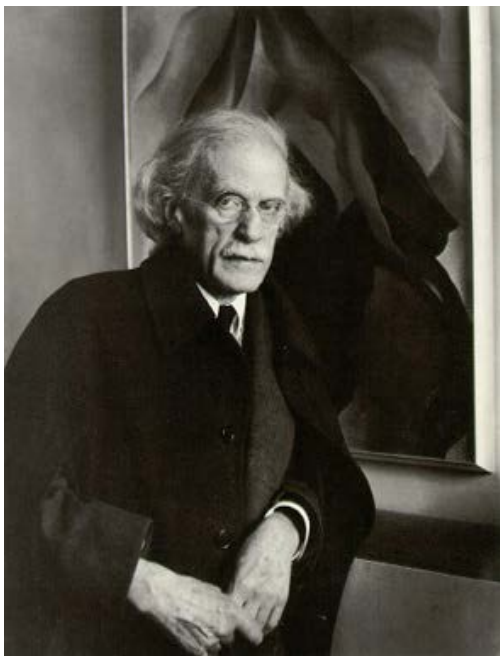
When Alison Nordstrom "was approached by the Vancouver Art Gallery to do a pictorialist exhibition, she decided to shake things up," Mackie relates, by including arresting images from photographers who preceded the pictorialists - Julia Margaret Cameron, Hill and Adamson, and Oscar Rejlander. As well as those who continued to show "pictorialist tendencies" long after the movement was supposedly over - most notably, Ed Weston and Ansel Adams.

As co-founder and co-director of Vancouver's first photographic gallery - the Mind's Eye Gallery that opened upstairs at 52 Water Street in 1974 - I had been thrilled to show the work of Weston and Adams, Minor White, Paul Capanigro, Walker Evans and other "greats". Thinking myself knowledgeable, instead of narrowly parochial, I was delightfully startled by Nordström's one-of-a-kind exhibition, which brought in rare Pictorialist prints from Czechoslovakia, Australia and Japan.

"I didn't want to do the same old pictorialism show that somebody does every five years," Nordström told MacIntyre. Parting from convention by including "places that are not generally treated well or extensively in the history of photography," Nordström went even further, that reporter wrote, by "hugely" expanding a time period that began in the late 1880s and was supposedly "pretty much over" by the First World War.

Speaking for the VAG, Nordström says, "We also contest the idea that one day in 1914, everyone got a memo from Alfred Stieglitz saying 'Don't be a pictorialist any more, be a modernist.'"

Even though such a directive would have come from photography's god.



### STIEGLITZ AND STEICHEN

If a bell rings in photographic heaven every time their names are either invoked or inscribed, the clamor must be deafening.

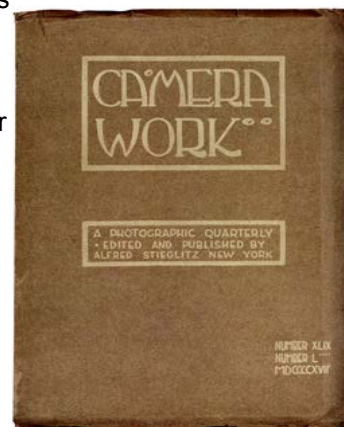
"You cannot have a discussion of pictorialism without talking about Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen," Alison Nordström insists. "They're important not only as photographers - they were writers, they were critics, they were curators. Even today, their ideas shaped how we understand photography."

"Strong-willed and single-minded in pursuit of his vision for Pictorialist photography, Stieglitz organized a small, hand-picked group of photographers known as the Photo-Secession. In the first decade of the century, they played a key role in establishing photography as a fine art," write Goldberg and Silberman.

Stieglitz and the Pictorialists burned with their resolve to see photographs exhibited "alongside painting and sculpture in the citadels of fine art" galleries and museums. Photography, Stieglitz wrote, should be regarded "not as the handmaiden of art, but as a distinctive medium of individual expression."

In reverence and amazement, I nearly genuflected before the issues of *Camera Work* and *Camera Notes* displayed in a glass case under posters for the Pictorialists' signature publications. Now among the rarest of collector's items, Stieglitz's groundbreaking *Camera Work* featured photogravure prints individually hand-pulled from platen presses, and then "hand-tipped" onto colored-paper pages.

But hand-mounting each print on each page of every issue of *Camera Work* presented later problems. In a letter to Grace Titus on December 18, 1833, Stieglitz wrote: "Frequently *Camera Work* came out of the bindery with plates to be inserted by me personally after binding. Some years ago many of the insets were either destroyed or mislaid. Hence the impossibility of completing many issues... Absolutely complete sets of *Camera Work* are very, very rare & are priceless. The Plates in *Camera Work* for the major part are photogravures made directly from original negatives & were made under my direction as



were the prints. So from a certain point of view many of the Plates might be looked upon as a species of originals." [ebay item 290030212499]

## BIGGIES

Curator Nordström also went big on Alvin Langdon Coburn, whose 16 works highlight the VAG show. "An artist is a man who tries to express the inexpressible," Coburn wrote in 1916. "Occasional moments of ecstasy lure him on..."

This painter-photographer turned their derision back on old art fogies: "They hold up their hand in horror, they show their bad manners by scoffing and jeering at something they are too antiquated to understand. It is the revolutionary of to-day, however, who is the 'classic' of to-morrow" Coburn noted. Indeed, he demanded, "Why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried?"

Nor did this photographic giant have time for machine-camera carping. "Is it really so? Pause for a moment and consider the mysterious quality of light registering itself in sensitized gelatine – all the scientific poetry in the words 'latent image'".

Alas, he went on. "Now every 'nipper' has a 'Brownie', and a photograph is as common as a box of matches... Photography is too easy in a superficial way, and in consequence is treated slightly by people who ought to know better. One does not consider Music an inferior art simply because little Mary can play a scale. What we need in photography is more sincerity, more respect for our medium and less respect for its decayed conventions." [masters-of-photography.com]

And more respect for women, too – many of whom first experienced emancipation through a lens, and in the accolades that followed. As the PBS mini-series underscores, "The Photo-Secession included many accomplished women, such as Gertrude Käsebier and Anne Brigman. Their work often suggests a feminist outlook, whether in images of mothers and daughters or in daring nude self-portraits."

## TRANSCENDENTAL NUDES

With talented women of vision finding rare freedom of expression in the Pictorialist camp, Alison Nordström has found herself "getting very attached to Anne Brigman [and her] sort of crazy nudes coming out of trees."

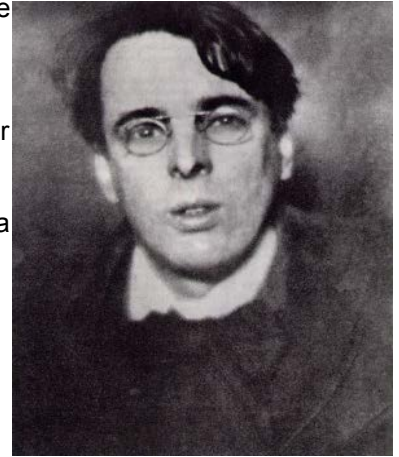
As anyone who has photographed a naked arbutus – or been enticed out of her clothes to embrace a tree before an inquisitive lens knows – both forms fit in photographic perfection. But Brigman did not stop with the shutter's released. Back in her Oakland studio, she applied pencils, paint, caustic chemicals and etching tools directly on her negatives – which were then sometimes superimposed by sandwiching them together in her enlarger. All this in aid of her drive, as another museum described it, "to transcend mere depiction and express her highly personal vision."

Don't ask Alison Nordström to pick her favorite photograph. During the installation, she kept using that appellation for nearly every print! When pressed, the Eastman photographic curator also professes a love for the architectural photography of Frederick Evans. As this expert puts it, "Evans was and maybe remains the best platinum printer ever." [Vancouver Sun Feb 22/08; museumca.org; *American Photography: A Century of Images*, and the public television series - yourwall.com]



## THE SOUL OF LIGHT

It was this rare display of platinum prints by the master of pictorial photography, Frederick H. Evans that brought Misha and me up short. Called by the great playwright, George Bernard Shaw, "the most artistic of photographers," Evans – the Andrew Smith Gallery tells us – "advocated 'untouched realism' in an era when it was believed that only by elaborate manipulation of photographic negative and print could photography approximate fine art."



One of the first “Purist” photographers, the gallery goes on to note, “Evans developed his negatives mechanically, and printed them, without retouching, by contact on platinum paper, which he chose for its ability to reproduce the rich tonal scale of the negative.”

But this textual description does not even hint at the receding perspectives drawing us into ambushing shafts of light spilling from the naves and alcoves, carved stone columns, soaring archways and the seas of steps leading 21<sup>st</sup> Century viewers into majestically medieval Gothic cathedrals.

Were talking about some of the most exquisite images ever made. “The entire effect is one of stunning beauty and rarity,” the museum description quickly adds.

Call it cataclysmic.

“Tireless and fastidious in his work,” Evans’ *soul* intent was to propel viewers through his luminous, looking-glass prints into feeling as if they were actually inside Wells Cathedral.

Circa 1890.

“To achieve this he sometimes spent as much as two weeks living in a cathedral studying the way light and shadow defined forms and created a spiritual atmosphere,” the Adams gallery explains. “Searching for relationships between light and dark,” Evans sought to express the “Divine Plan” channeled by stonemasons into organic form. For he believed, “The structural qualities of a Gothic cathedral are very closely allied to those organic principles which underlie the growth or cohesion of living things.”

This perspicacious photographer understood that shadow is key to delineating light. While the Darwinians were finding no meaning in randomly mutated life, Evans believed in an intelligible creation mirrored the physical realm. Fascinated by peering through microscopes, his “photomicrographs” of the eye of a water beetle and a sea urchin’s spine elevated the naturalist’s cold specimen catalogues to portals into the divine. At age 45, he sold his bookshop to surrender to photography and his “life-long study of the beautiful.”

Forget drugs. Fall into an Evans print and remain immersed there long enough, and your own internal alchemy will permanently transmuted. As his biographer Anne Hammond insightfully adds, “Throughout the length of the cathedral the viewer is led on a visual pilgrimage toward interior illumination.” [andrewsmithgallery.com]

Once seen through a viewfinder or print, that light cannot be extinguished.

## DEJA VIEW

Not every Pictorialist was as focused as Coburn, Brigman and Evans. Many of the earliest photographs featured elaborately staged tableaux meant to resemble Renaissance paintings. With exposures approaching two minutes, they had to!

No wonder so many artists-turning-photographers became confused. A self-portrait made early in the 1900s by Edward Steichen portrays the rebel photographer “as a painter, palette and brush in hand,” narrates a PBS DVD, *American Photography: A Century of Images*. “He was forever swearing off painting and informing Stieglitz that he was dedicated to photography; here he embraces both. Sadakichi Hartmann, a contemporary critic, skewered Steichen with a parody of Hamlet’s famous soliloquy: ‘To paint or to photograph – that is the question.’”

*Ah ha!* Another koan-like contradiction is this: Though the Pictorialists labored over finicky wet-plate processes to separate themselves from amateurs who would soon be letting Kodak “do the rest” – *Camera Work* itself often included seemingly amateurish images. Snapshots, it turns out, can also be made using a tripod.

But the excitement that zings from these old-new prints was – is – *their excitement*. In their born again infatuation, the Pictorialists photographed anything that caught their eye. Or irony. Stieglitz made photography heroic by standing for hours in New York City blizzards, waiting for a “decisive moment” much harder to capture than those later framed by the 35-mm Leica-waving Henri Cartier-Bresson.





Again and again, I had to pinch myself. Was I really seeing copies of *Camera Work*, Evans famous “Sea of Steps”, Stieglitz’s “Flatiron Building”?

Falling into luminous platinum prints as vivid as hallucinations propelled me willy-nilly back through the virtuality of my contemporary digital domain back... back... back to watching spellbound as my father set up an enlarger in our kitchen one night. Dads can do anything, of course. But this was beyond any kid’s ken when he dipped an exposed sheet of photographic paper into a tray of developer and conjured a print of patrol plane formation from one of his Pacific wartime cockpit negatives. His prized Leica IIIg sits on my bookshelf now – after bailing me out of an expensive aerial shoot some years back, when my expensive whizbang SLR refused to awaken from its electronic slumber.

#### MAGIC, SEX AND WONDER

Back in the Vancouver Art Gallery, following each fresh secession of photo surprises through room after room, I could feel my own fingers once again loading a 4x5 film holder in pitch dark. Then I started to *smell* the darkrooms where I learned my arcane craft.

Maybe it was those dreamy nudes and diaphanous gowned mistress-goddesses so passionately pursued by Pictorialists that evoked sudden sharply tactile memories of bumping against a lady friend in a university darkroom, while aligning an image projected on an easel, choosing the proper paper grade, setting the enlarger’s f-stop... then tripping the timer and waving my hands across its projected beam. Like a modern day Merlin, I attempted to retain detail in the contrasty bits by “burning” highlights and “dodging” shadows. And bumping a shockingly soft breast leaning inquisitively in the dark.

Try evoking this hormonal overload in a bright-lit room with your digital printer!

Even working with a fumbled kiss resounding in my ear, still deeper wonders surfaced as I dipped the blank sheet of Kodak Number 3 8x10 paper into a tray of Dektol... and waited under a submariner’s dim safelight glow for this next depth charge to explode our imaginations. Hearts hammering from the proximity of flesh and photography, we waited with doubly held breath as that latent image swam slowly into view...

Took form...

And held!

My God! Years later, working under deadline pressure in the crowded *Vancouver Sun* darkroom, each long moment of anticipation followed by slow limpid revelation in those pungent trays never failed to stun me with a conjuring more real than a séance but seemingly no less occult. No wonder the first photographers narrowly escaped witch-burning for daring to practice their “dark” art.

But we are celebrating light! Splash and swish through the water-rinse tray, then the print is whisked into the hypo to fix its precious silver-salts. For so many good years, while a succession of Pentaxes, Nikons and Leicas never left my side, the badge that instantly identified working photographers to each other was our hypo-stained fingernails, dyed brown as nicotine on our right hands. Though all the wonders of digital printing, with its seemingly infinite, too often obsessive pixel-by-pixel control – I miss it still.

But the wonder is still there. And if Stieglitz and his collaborators were willing to try anything in any light, “going digital” has at least freed photographers from the tyranny of expensive film, allowing us not only to go for any exposure, any time, but check the result in the field, delete, tweak – and try again.

#### FUZZY LOGIC

Commenting on “The Art of Pictorial Photography 1890-1925” – an earlier retrospective held at the Princeton University Art Museum – the hard-nosed *New York Times* describes the Pictorialists’ “sentimental images”... its “fuzzy prints, genteel imagery and self-conscious artiness”... embodied in “moody landscapes and quiet domestic scenes.” [nytimes.com]



By 1923, Steichen would have agreed. Reading the realist's riot act to stunned acolytes clutching photographs of could be walls or leaves – who the hell knew? – this recovering Pictorialist damned the soft-focus lens as “the most pernicious influence in the pictorial world.”

Renouncing his own work, Steichen went on to proclaim, “I don't care about making photography an art. I want to make good photographs. I'd like to know who first got it into his head that dreaminess and mist is art.”

Whoever it was, he was probably dead in a muddy trench in France. With the technology of the First World War resulting in carnage too horrific for either Romanticism or Pictorialism to survive, it was Paul Strand who led the way to a new photographic aesthetic calling for unmanipulated “straight” photographs as sharply focused as a bullet.

Edward Weston and Ansel Adams would soon abandon their own fuzzy photographs and follow.

In 1933, even Stieglitz declared the Pictorialist photography he'd fostered “old-fashioned” and gave his entire collection of images to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. [pbs.org; yourwall.com]

Lest we megapixel-maddened digital obsessives forget, the Pictorialists were already photographing nature, nudes and industrial wastelands later “discovered” by the Purists. If what goes around comes around, at least in the continuing spiral of photography's aesthetic and technical ascension, it ratchets to the next level. This time, at the end of its run, *Camera Work* once again led the way, publishing Strand's “straight” photographs.

#### FULL CIRCLE

Since “anyone can take a picture,” what could an old photograph possibly be worth?

One answer came on December 22, 2007, when several editions of *Camera Work* fell under the auctioneer's hammer at Swann's. Number 36, with 16 photogravures by Alfred Stieglitz made in 1911 New York, fetched \$28,800.

Roy De Carava's *Roy De Carava*, with its 12 dust-grain photogravures printed by Paul Taylor in 1991, was the auction's top lot – going, going – *sold at \$81,000!* [photogravure.com]

If money talks and pretense walks, “Fine Art Photography” has finally come of age. But hurry! The exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery on Robson Street ends April 27, 2008. Admission is \$15.

