

They Might Be Giants

The Monterey Museum of Art opens a stunning exhibit by master photographer Pirkle Jones.

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By Rick Deragon Oct 3, 2002 0

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The sun is setting on modern photography, creating shadows and voids. Once, giants loomed large over the terrain of shutter speeds and f/stops, and the land was populated with masters and disciples, teachers and technicians. But now, the light fades and the great ones join hands in the twilight.

A handsome exhibition of photographs by Pirkle Jones, a Bay Area photographer and colleague of the great ones, is now at the Monterey Museum of Art's Civic Center. Ansel Adams retrospectives all over the country this year are honoring Adams's enormous influence on modern photography, so it is most informative to be able to study the work of a man who studied with him and Minor White, knew Edward Weston, and worked collaboratively with Dorothea Lange. The 88-year-old Jones has amassed a body of work that reflects the straight photography tenets so promoted by these giants, while pursuing his own brand of subject matter and expressing his unique sensibility. Jones hasn't followed in their footsteps as much as he has imbibed a creative and technical point of view from them.

In addition, after 40 years of teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute, Jones has passed on what he knows to his students. So if the sun is setting on modern photography, at least the lights of awareness flicker across the land.

A survey of Jones's work at the museum reveals his manifold interests. Using a straight photographic approach, he has captured landscapes, vignettes of San Francisco, still lifes, field workers, social revolutionaries, the seacoast, and people. His photographs conjure up old San Francisco, the turgid politics of the 1960s, a sense of California's growth as a paradise and cauldron of alternative ideas.

A new book to be published by Gray Bull Press next month features the photographs of Jones and Ruth Marion Baruch documenting the Black Panthers in the late '60s. According to this month's Vanity Fair, the book is good.

"I don't specifically intellectualize about what I photograph, it's more impulsive. I do just what I want," explains Jones. "I spent my whole life trying to reconnect with the first feeling I had toward nature. I put quite a

considerable amount of myself into it trying to come up with something I could call my own, original and exciting. Whereas some pictures are illustrations of nature, I wanted to go beyond that."

Jones recalls Adams, Weston and White and what they imparted to him. His experience working with Lange as they documented the destruction of the Berryessa Valley farming community remains a highlight of a long career.

"I studied with Ansel. I had the good fortune to be exposed to him and his amazing intellect, his many talents. The training was very technical, but mixed with creative information," recalls Jones. "When I met Edward Weston, I was deeply impressed by this special man. Some people don't have to speak, their energy reaches out. The first time we met, we didn't say a word. But we were communicating. It was quite remarkable!"

Life magazine commissioned photographs from Jones and Lange for a spread on the Berryessa Valley before it was inundated with water from a new dam. Though the story never ran, the photographs remain a melancholy elegy to lives dispossessed as California acted on its thirst for more water.

"Dorothea was a very intelligent woman with a vision. She was able to combine an artistic sensibility with journalism. She could capture a place with all its drama without anyone knowing she was there," Jones states.

As Jones reflects on his teaching career and the tenor of the times, he notes the high points and the changes. "We live in a computer world, let's face it," he observes. "Some younger people are going back to the old processes, reviving the old ways, but it's a digital world. The silver image will be less pursued; the manufacturers will cut back. It's a fast paced world and people don't have the time for the darkroom."

One era gives way to another. Pirkle Jones is an important link to a period of modern photography when photographers were driven by an irrepressible love of the medium and the heart-quickenning exploration of the medium's expressive possibilities. His work stands as a testament to that passion.

And As a Side Dish

Along with the Pirkle megashow, the Monterey Museum of Art has mounted an exciting, but too-small, exhibition of paintings titled *On the Surface: Contemporary Paintings by Bay Area Women*. Eight painters' work, shoe-horned into the museum's Coburn Gallery, features rich surfaces, if varied styles by Robilee Friedrich, Carol Dalton, **Sara Carter**, Susan Parker, Crystal Dilbon-ner, Deborah Orapallo, Amanda Hass and Jaime Brunson. According to curator Mary Murray, the unifying element of the paintings is the surface dynamics wherein a number of different effects work on the viewer's sensibilities. Thick paint, smooth glossy finishes, incised encaustic and taped edges are "on the surface."

Below the surface lie several unanswered questions, notably, why the "women" category? There is no thematic thread connecting the work, no particularly feminine orientation; it's just very exciting painting. Is there some agenda at work by having all women artists? Do women artists

need the safety of numbers? Isn't good painting just good painting, regardless of the artist's gender?

In any case, local painters shouldn't miss this exhibition because the work, for the most part, is vital, fresh and provocative. One only hopes the museum will bring more Bay Area painting, by women and men, to the provinces soon.

--R.D.



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