

Finding the Shape in the Wood

An Interview of Robert Adams by Peter Brown

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PB - You are both a photographer and a writer, and while the photographic side has obviously held precedence for you, I'm interested in the ways that you've dealt with these two abilities over the years. How has each influenced the other?

RA - I'm only a writer a little bit. As Fran Lebowitz said (I love it!), "I write so slowly I could write with my own blood and not hurt myself."

The puzzle is not only to figure out what one might have the gift and skill to say, but to figure out what can only be said and what can only be shown. A still photograph, for example, rarely by itself does justice to complex moral issues, whereas a book of essays might. Though essays rarely do justice to a tree, whereas a photograph might.

There aren't any rules, just the final test of whether writing or a picture is relevant. Assuming that the main challenge of life is to love life—to see it clearly and accept it and be thankful for it—then any activity that helps us do that is worthwhile, and its form is the right form.

PB - Given that, what activities are you pursuing right now?

RA - The main thing we're doing in pursuit of hope is photographing clearcuts. Most of the original forests in the Northwest have been destroyed, and no affirmation from the Northwest seems to me convincing if it can't acknowledge that fact. Will I get to a yes? Photographs are given, not taken, so we'll see.

Books are important to Kerstin and me, and we try to keep doing them. I've even, for fun, been carving some books out of wood. To have around the house instead of computer terminals. The only rule is that the wood has to have washed up on the beach.

PB - Do the books have texts?

RA - One does. I asked Kerstin to calligraph on its open pages a line that Neruda wrote to his wife - "I made these sonnets out of wood." The rest of the books show just a horizon line. Have you read Mary Oliver's The Leaf and the Cloud? In it she asks "would it be better to sit in silence?" Thankfully her decision has been to speak, but for those of us who are not poets maybe a book of silence is permitted.

PB - My sense is that you and Kerstin are very much a team. And though I know you have strong feelings about privacy, tell me what you can about your photographic life together. How, for instance, do you work the clearcuts?

RA - Kerstin and I share a lot of enthusiasms - Renaissance and Baroque music, for instance, and films. And we share concerns about population, ecological degradation, animal welfare, corporate misbehavior.... We're not saints. I give in to all kinds of despair and fury. But on the basis of our common enjoyments and commitments we do get past some of these failures and go to work. Together. The mix changes some, and it's not always equal. Kerstin does all the cooking, for example, and I do almost all the photo business. What we share most is the editing, both of the pictures and of the text. She is very good.

Currently she's going with me to industrial forests. The thought was to have somebody there in case I took a nose dive off a stump, like Darius Kinsey, but she's in a few of the pictures and I like them. One of my goals is to suggest the sadness of what has happened, and because she feels it, the way she stands or sits sometimes expresses a lot.

PB - Trees are central to much of your work. It seems to me that just as poets build up personal mythologies over time, photographers do the same. What do trees represent to you? Why are so many of your books focused on trees?

RA - The short answer, I suppose, is that they are so beautiful. But what does that mean? In Virginia Woolf's novel To The Lighthouse the central character, Mrs. Ramsay, thinks about three lines of poetry: "And all the lives we ever lived / And all the lives to be, / Are full of trees and changing leaves." That surely is a reason we attend to trees.

PB - Because trees are more than trees.

RA - Yes. Although if one spells out a metaphor in a picture, the picture often gets smaller.

Among the best things about photography is that by its nature it has to begin with specific cases. A tree is first of all wonderful as the particular tree it is. If it doesn't live for us in that way then it's not going to take us further.

Though eventually, yes, a tree does point beyond itself. And our experience of it is enriched by associations and intuitions. A.J. Meek recently sent me an unforgettable view of the Union cemetery at Shiloh—rows of gravestones beneath big old trees. The picture brings to mind Thomas Worthington Whittredge's painting of a camp meeting under trees. And Stonewall Jackson's dying words, "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees." And George Barnard's pictures of trees broken by cannon fire. All those associations reinforce an understanding that the trees in Meek's picture are more than just landscaping.

PB - Trees often stand for people.

RA - Human beings and trees share some qualities. One quality that we do not share with trees, however, is our periodic inclination to gratuitous killing. Witness what we do to trees.

PB - You have implied elsewhere that you think nihilism underlies some of the practices of industrial forestry. Why do you believe that?

RA - Greed at first appears to account for clearcutting, and that surely is a large part of it. But I'm suspicious. After people live a while in a place they've laid waste, it gets to be easy for them to hate a great many things. Including themselves, and life in general, and whatever green that tries to rise again.

PB - Your part of Colorado has changed dramatically over the years, and in many ways your work has been a documentation of the "laying waste" to that particular ground. Is this change the reason that you moved from Colorado to Oregon?

RA - Ironically we moved to Oregon because we were tired. I felt I had seen too much for too long. And we had enjoyed living on the coast for short periods. But we had never paid attention to the interior of Oregon, and when we did that our experience of the state changed. We discovered that only something like five percent of the old growth forest remains. Most of the timber one sees now is a monoculture sustained by chemicals and harvested by clearcutting, which is done in cycles of just forty or fifty years. And the timber industry has so thoroughly corrupted the social structure that it is hard to imagine how adequate change can come from within the region. The financing of Oregon's schools, for example, is linked directly to timber revenues, so to suggest that logging should be restricted—that clearcutting should be stopped, for instance, before the soil is exhausted—is seen as an attack on children.

PB - Will these problems come out in your pictures?

RA - Not the complexities.

PB - What other issues bother you?

RA - More broadly, population. The American West is seriously overpopulated and rapidly getting worse. It is an ecological issue of the utmost importance. Whole cities have no future because there aren't sources of water to sustain them. The most pressing problem is immigration. No matter where we come from—Boston or Mexico—our numbers need to be greatly reduced, because recent arrivals account for the majority of the population growth in the West. Humanitarian concerns, from political sanctuary to simple survival of course will have to be weighed.

A friend recently passed along an essay, published over thirty years ago, entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons.” In it the author argues that accelerating environmental disaster mandates that ethics be two-tiered. Issues relating just to human happiness—freedom to live anywhere we want, freedom to have as many children as we want—must take second place to issues of human survival and the survival of all life on earth. It is an argument that raises frighteningly complex and dangerous questions. But ours is not a privileged time.

PB - What sorts of things would have to happen for Americans to seriously consider such steps?

RA - Adequate education. Or the arrival of the Four Horsemen.

PB - You’ve been a photographer for over thirty-five years. Do you work now for the same reasons, more or less, that you did at the beginning?

RA - I still love the American West and I still love seeing an image come up in the tray. If anything has changed it’s that photography seems harder. I’m less able to believe in the likelihood of economic and social reform, a hope that once enabled me to photograph Denver streets. It’s a problem that accompanies age, I assume.

PB - Are there compensations for age?

RA - Some. One comes to know friendship at its full value.

PB - You mentioned A.J. Meek... I know that a good number of the photographers of my generation hold you in high regard and have been influenced both by your work and in some cases, your friendship. You and Kerstin have no children of your own, but are in a way an almost familial (though distant) presence to many. I’d be interested in your comments on that thought.

RA - In important ways it’s the younger generation that keeps care of the older, giving it hope. I’m grateful.

PB - You have been very critical of America but you still love it. Why?

RA - Yeats wrote to Maud Gonne that “only God could love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair.” I love my country partly for itself alone, for its spirit, for its attempt to live up to the Declaration and the Constitution. But I also love America, almost to distraction, for what I see—for roads, fields, birds...

PB - You've photographed the beauty and vulnerability of places that are often, on the surface, degraded - mostly the flatlands of the west, but also Los Angeles and now Oregon. Are there other parts of the country - or the world for that matter, that you would photograph given time?

RA - I can't imagine any place that isn't worth photographing.

PB - In what ways have the events of September 11th changed your life?

RA - They've reawakened in me the sense that we are tragic. The attack did not perhaps need to happen. We'll never know. What we do know, I think, is that it would have been less likely if we had worked harder for effective world government. To do that, however, we would have had to be less selfish.

PB - How would you describe yourself politically?

RA - As a democratic socialist. Though given the realities of present-day America, I'll support almost anyone who works to end our dependency on foreign oil and the militarization that that dependency requires. Many now in office are skills for corporate power. They threaten our country more even than the terrorists.

PB - Do you think we, as Americans, are worse than other people?

RA - Probably not. Maybe, just maybe, at times we're even a little better than some. But that is small comfort as one looks at a child we've maimed in our effort to punish terrorists.

PB - Under the circumstances, what do you feel our obligations to be?

RA - Insofar as I understand them, to keep trying. And asking forgiveness.

PB - Your first book was on the rural churches of Colorado and your last was on a single piece of Buddhist sculpture. Does religion enter your life and thought in important ways?

RA - My impulse is to say yes, but that may seem unsupported when I add that I don't belong to any religious group, at least for now.

PB - After September 11th, life will be hard now for artists in the United States. They will have even less support than before.

RA - Yes they will. Perhaps saddest of all, it will be harder to be young, to try to publish a first book for example. Though as so often it could be so much worse. And our subject is still as compelling as ever. Edward Dahlberg had it right: "Homer sang of many sacred towns in Hellas that were no better than

Kansas City.” I also try to remind myself of the obvious: no society has ever much encouraged the crazy notion that the way light falls on a vacant lot is important. Artists are dreamers.

PB - In a better world, what part might art play?

RA - It might help us know our dependency and express our gratitude. Artists would understand their work to be a calling. Museums would be places of focus and stillness.

PB - What pictures would you have in your ideal museum?

RA - If one chose well, one could build a wonderful collection around an etching by Rembrandt, a drawing by Cezanne and a photograph by Atget.

PB - What sustains you visually in your own home?

RA - We actually have a photograph by Atget! And a wonderful selection of photographs and paintings by colleagues. Together with the Gandharan sculpture that is the subject of the book you mentioned, and two New Mexican Santos.

PB - What periodicals do you read? Do you subscribe to DoubleTake?

RA - I’ve subscribed from the beginning, and I hope very much for its long life, as I do for publications like The New Yorker and The New York Review of Books.

I’ve heard photographers say that DoubleTake favors writers, and I’m told that writers say it favors photographers (laughs). If photographers have any truth on their side it may in part reflect a problem built in to magazine production—how to get a lot included, and make it lively, but at the same time present visual art, pictures that are complete in themselves. You could say that the problem is “who is going to be the artist, the photographer or the designer?” The difficulty arises particularly with the designer’s use of bleeds and with the practice of running pictures across the gutter. The four sides of the view in the camera finder are the photographer’s main tools for bringing clarity out of life’s confusion. If in reproduction any of the sides of that frame are weakened, as happens with a bleed, or if the image is divided, the reproduction does not convey well the artist’s primary gift to us.

My sense is that DoubleTake is struggling with this problem, as it must if artists, as distinguished from journalists, are to be convinced to submit work.

PB - Do you read fiction?

RA - Very little anymore. But I do have a favorite novel, Virginia Woolf’s To The Lighthouse. I wish I had time to commit large parts of it to memory.

PB - What is it that you find particularly appealing about To The Lighthouse?

RA - Woolf's humanity, especially her wise and forgiving picture of the nature of women and men. And her sense of the miracle of each day. And of the visual. The book ends with an amateur painter's completion of a difficult picture. There isn't a more peaceful final page in all of literature.

PB - I'm interested in your ability to quote widely with what seems to be remarkable ease.

RA - I have an increasingly bad memory. You're just talking with an unreconstructed literature teacher.

PB - You've distinguished between photojournalism and art photography. What significance does the term "documentary" have for you?

RA - I wrestle with it, because so many of my heroes have been called documentarians—O'Sullivan, Atget, Hine, Lange... What do they have in common? Certainly a commitment to a sustained, unblinking engagement with life, life in believable complexity. That's so hard to maintain that "documentary" always brings me back to the word "caring." It is serious work.

PB - And what do you work with? What are your photographic tools, and your thoughts on phototechnology in general? Does digital work hold interest for you? Computers?

RA - Anything is okay that works. I'm intrigued by the range of low light conditions that seem open to digital cameras. And by any print making process that doesn't mandate breathing chemical fumes. And by any reproduction process that makes spotting easy. I am, however, alienated by the complexity of digital machinery, and by the apparently brief life expectancy of it. And by the doubtful longevity of the prints. There is too the obvious fact that an ink print is not the same as a silver gelatin print, even though they both may be beautiful and register an equal range of tones. I find that I still prefer silver gelatin prints, so I continue to use 120 film cameras.

PB - One more question on trees. You've talked of Darius Kinsey, who photographed the logging - some might say carnage - of much of the old growth forests of the Northwest around the turn of the century. In considering his work now, in light of your own, what are your reactions?

RA - It just seems a wholly different place, like a stage at the end of act five. Or maybe not quite that yet. As Margaret Drabble has reportedly observed, we're not at the beginning of the end, we're at the middle of the end.

PB - This has been a serious conversation.

RA - Yes, maybe too much so. Maybe we should return to Fran Lebowitz. She joked once, you know, that life seems less like art than craft, less like a painting by Seurat than a macramé plant holder.

PB - That has the knottiness of life, even if it's a little short on mystery.

RA - It's easy to neglect humor. And mystery too. There are so many astonishing encounters with mystery. I remember one foggy October evening, just after we had moved here, when we were sitting in the living room and Kerstin looked up from her reading and asked if I heard something. I hadn't. I listened and still couldn't be sure I heard anything. She said it seemed to be coming from outside, so we opened the front door and went onto the porch, where we realized it was the voices of small birds migrating south over our hill top, just out of sight up in the fog. They were perhaps no more than thirty or forty feet above us, and their passage went on for a long time. How many thousands of birds must there have been. We never saw any of them, but we felt we could almost touch them. It was an event from which Charles Burchfield would have made a painting.

PB - What other sorts of reference points are important to you?

RA - Family and friends. Both those who are here now, and those who are no longer present in body. And some people whom I haven't ever met in person, and with whom I haven't even exchanged a letter, but whom I feel I know—Wendell Berry, Henry Beetle Hough, Edward Hopper, Emily Dickinson, Samuel Johnson...

Even if one believes, as I do, that in general the nature of life is uncomfortable, there are still pleasures to be enjoyed. We ought not overlook them. Eating at a beautifully set table, for example. Or music. Or working with hand tools—helping a chisel find the line of a boat or a bird or a book. Finding the shape in the wood.