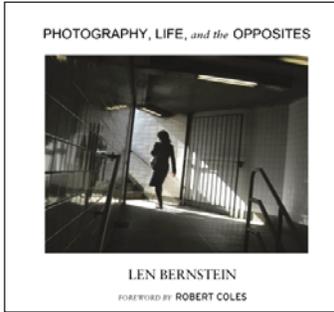


PHOTOGRAPHY, LIFE, and the OPPOSITES

by Len Bernstein

A Book Review by Harvey Spears



I thought I was going to read Len Bernstein's new book, *Photography, Life, and the Opposites*, in one sitting. But I couldn't, and here's why: it inspired new thought and made for such large emotions in me that I wanted to savor them.

When I got to the last page, I was sure of two things: first, I had a deeper understanding of what makes for beauty in photography; and second, I was a more thoughtful person. Mr. Bernstein, a photographer and teacher, has based his approach to the art he clearly loves on this historic principle of Aesthetic Realism, stated by its founder, the eminent American philosopher and poet Eli Siegel: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." With clarity and style, Mr. Bernstein keeps the promise he makes in his Preface: "You will learn what makes a photograph successful and how our most everyday and urgent questions are answered in art."

The black & white and color photographs in this volume display a fine artistic sensibility and are reproduced beautifully. Many of them are of daily life, and they are moving. But it is their meaningful relation to the text that will have you feel, from the very beginning, part of an odyssey that is not only the author's, but has large meaning for every person. You will learn about the impediments in oneself to seeing fairly, both in art and in life. Len Bernstein's journey, before we realize it, becomes our own, even while it is uniquely his. We see ourselves in him and his work.

People have been waiting a long time for a book like this—a book that illustrates, through beautiful photographs and text, how art and life are inextricably together. It's with style and the thrill of a hopeful explorer. The chapter titles alone will draw you in. For example, there are "The Oneness of Assertion and Yielding in Life and Art," "Can You Tell the Difference Between Candor and Brutality?" and "Truth and Our Imagination."

As a photographer myself, and as one who is fortunate to be learning from Aesthetic Realism about how to see things with the justice they deserve, I know that good photography does not come easily and I'm grateful to Mr. Bernstein for what he has seen. It will make me a better photographer.

In the chapter "Where Does Photography Begin?" he writes: "The art of photography begins long before we ever pick up a camera; it begins with how we see the whole world." He tells of his study of Aesthetic Realism in consultations, where he began learning how to see both the world and a person close to him more accurately, and how crucial this was to having more integrity as an artist. Here is a brief excerpt of one consultation:

Consultants: If you have to give your attention to something else, as a photographer, what does it take your attention away from for a while?

LB: From myself.

Consultants: Would you say you have that question with your wife—that is, if you give your thought to her for fifteen minutes, those are fifteen minutes you can't give to yourself?

LB: Yes, that makes sense.

Consultants: Now, do you think it's possible—and this is where aesthetics comes in—to feel that as you are giving your thought to something else, you are taking care of yourself?

Again and again, Mr. Bernstein shows what he learned: that the biggest matter in our lives is how we see the outside world, and that criticism, including self-criticism, is necessary if we want to do a good job. He shows that it is the artist's desire to see fairly, and not his or her ego, that makes for art. And who knew that criticizing our own egos could be so much fun and make for so much pride?

The author discusses an early portrait he took of his wife, Harriet. This discussion, about the relation of dark and light, assertion and yielding, intensity and calm, is a tour-de-force of technical and life criticism that is precise and illuminating. He says: "I remember looking into her eyes and feeling so lucky that we were learning how to have a good effect on each other. I wanted very much to capture some of the qualities in her that I fell in love with—including a deep friendliness I've come to count on."

He continues: "This photograph has a reposeful quality, with its symmetrical composition—and from the moment we met, I did feel Harriet brought some repose to my turbulent nature. But she is not just placid. Her face is dramatically divided between light and dark, between what is clearly seen and unplumbed depths, and her gaze is penetrating, critical."

This book is not only for photographers and artists—it is for everyone. Mr. Bernstein wanted the combination of photographs and text to be "a means of understanding the fight that rages in every person between respect for the world and contempt for it. They are a means of asking: What does it mean to have a beautiful way of seeing; a way of seeing that will make us proud?"

I believe the photo "Stone and Humanity. New Orleans, LA" comments importantly on these two kinds of perception—one based on respect, the other on contempt. Mr. Bernstein writes: "In daily life, it is common to focus on a detail about someone in order to think less of him or her. One example is looking at an article of clothing a person is wearing and smugly thinking, 'I'd never wear that!' The purpose of art is very different: A detail is focused on to hint at something greater.

"That's what I was going after when I took this photograph. We see only a part of this person, and it sets us to wondering who he is. There is wonder also in the fact that man and building are so continuous with each other, having light and dark tones in common, as well as similar architecture of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines. Stone and humanity have joined in a most surprising way."

In the 210 pages of this hardcover book, you will be treated to landscapes, portraits (both human and animal), photographs of historic events, like the 1983 "March on Washington for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom," celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's immortal "I Have A Dream" speech, as well as some wonderfully surprising candid photos of people. All of them, I think, will encourage you to feel that this is a world it is wise to see meaning in and have more feeling for.

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Len Bernstein's work is in many public collections, including The Library of Congress, Washington, DC, and Bibliothèque nationale de France. His articles have been published in the US and abroad. He has given photography workshops at high schools and colleges. www.LenBernstein.com

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