



## **Akron Art Museum's exhibit on photographer Edward Weston leaves viewer wanting more**

**Weston considered every detail when creating his photographs**

Sunday, February 15, 2009

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**Plain Dealer Art Critic**

Some artists achieve their goals through addition. They construct visual statements through a process of accretion and layered accumulation. Others subtract. They trim and pare and simplify until they achieve a radically irreducible statement from which no detail could be removed -- or added -- without destroying the whole.

Edward Weston, the great 20th-century American photographer, was most emphatically a subtractionist, to coin a term. His famous images of sand dunes, lissome nudes and the supple, clenched shapes of bell peppers are purged of anything that might distract a viewer's attention from his pursuit of an elegant, machinelike perfection.

A deeply absorbing new exhibition at the Akron Art Museum shows how Weston, who started out as a commercial portrait photographer in the 1910s, discovered his artistic voice and produced some of the most unforgettable images of the modern age.

The show features 109 photographs, all drawn from the private collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg, two New York collectors who specialize in photography and who have amassed a large collection of vintage Weston prints, often acquiring them from surviving relatives of the photographer, who died in 1958 at age 71.

The show is the biggest Weston exhibition in Northeast Ohio since 1999, when the Cleveland Museum of Art hosted a show of 140 images, organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Like the Akron exhibition, the Boston show also focused on a single private collection, that of William and Sandra Lane of Boston.

The Cleveland exhibition focused tightly on Weston's most famous images from the 1920s through the 1940s and celebrated the erotic energy that seemed to pulse through much of his oeuvre.

The Akron show has a different goal. It allows us to witness the broad arc of the photographer's evolution, but it also builds a strong case for considering Weston's still lifes of peppers, seashells and heads of Swiss chard as his peak achievement and the pivot from which all explorations flow or to which they lead.

The show's essence is reflected in works such as a 1927 image of two nested nautilus shells, which amounts to a sensuous study of how curved forms can be sculpted by strong, sharp, tangent light. The image is a stark close-up, with nothing to distract attention from pure, natural forms displayed against a background as dark as night.

The shells cast shadows on each other and catch reflections on their darkened flanks from light bouncing off adjacent, illuminated sections. They seem to pop out against a stark, black background or to melt into the darkness. They reflect light with a dull fleshiness or blaze softly with a pearly, iridescent sheen.

Weston wanted nothing more -- or less -- than to capture such effects with a kind of monumental clarity that makes the seashells seem like embodiments of ideal, Platonic forms. They're a fragment of immortality, seized at a specific moment of peak ripeness and perceptual acuity.

Weston's pursuit of such perfection is a rarefied expression of the Modernist aesthetics of radical simplification -- the same impulse that courses through the line drawings of Henri Matisse, the sculptures of Constantin Brancusi, the geometric abstractions of Kazimir Malevich.

But perhaps because he dealt with natural forms through the medium of photography, Weston's work often seems to exist outside a particular historical moment, while the work of other Modernists feels more rooted in time.

For that reason, it comes as something of a shock in the Akron show to encounter a Weston photograph from 1930, at the end of the sublime sequence of still-life photographs, in which three hardboiled eggs are arranged around a mechanical egg slicer.

In this photograph, the strong geometry and overhead position of Weston's camera evoke Russian Constructivist photography in a way that re-anchors the photographer's work in time. So, too, does the design of the egg slicer itself, a kitchen implement influenced by notions of streamlining popular in product design of the day.

That such stylistic touches could produce so strong a jolt is one indication of how the Akron exhibition treats Weston's work as a search for moments of extreme stylistic perfection, from which the slightest variance -- and the slightest addition of certain details -- can seem like a retreat.

Exhibit treats

career with balance

Organized in chronological and thematic groups that chart the arc of Weston's artistic trajectory from the 1910s to the 1940s, the show portrays the photographer as someone who jettisoned everything from his work that wasn't truly his, and which, in many cases, would tie his work to a specific time and place.

Mattis, a former theoretical physicist-turned full-time collector, sees an analogy between scientific efforts to describe and catalog all basic particles of matter and Weston's pursuit of elemental motifs in photography.

The prints, assembled with evident devotion by Mattis and Hochberg, treat Weston's career with a judicious sense of balance, giving equal proportional emphasis, for example, to early works in which Weston emulated the gauzy, darkly poetic effects of the Pictorialist movement.

But as framed by the current show, the early photos, including a soft-focus image of a young bride, from 1920, or a cluster of boats along the lakefront in Chicago, from 1915, tend to illustrate how Weston was yearning and searching for a clarity of vision and an individuality he did not yet possess.

On the other hand, the section of the show dealing with female nudes treats Weston's work in this area as analogous to his search for the austere, quasi-abstract universality he reaches in his still lifes. That wasn't always the case. Many of Weston's nudes include the faces of his favorite models, including his young, second wife, Charis Wilson.

The Akron show, instead, focuses on nudes as another branch of the artist's search for abstraction, simplification and refinement. In it, we see a famous image of Wilson reclining on a sand dune, facing away from us, in a pose somewhat reminiscent of the "Rokeby Venus" by the 17th-century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez.

But while Velazquez allows us to catch a glimpse of Venus' face in a mirror held by Cupid, Weston leaves Wilson gazing away from us, with her lush hair playing the role of a dark comma accentuating the smooth, flawless curves of her torso, derriere and legs. It's an evocation of womankind, not of a specific woman.

Such expressions are central to Weston's work, but like musical performers interpreting a score by a great composer, the collectors have created a particular rendition of Weston's photography. It's a powerful portrayal, but perhaps not definitive, and it leaves you wondering about other interpretations that might be possible.

Ultimately, it leaves you hungry to see and know more about Weston, which is one of the best possible effects any exhibition could have.

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