

We all know there are only two subjects, and since death is part of life, we all know there is only one subject.

Here and here, two balanced birds – a small sweet font of wings.

More birds, devouring a carcass. An explosion of shapes and forces, but also notable for all the vultures quietly waiting their turn.

The vultures were shot in India in 1993 and the little birds in 2018, as was this horse. The dates tell nothing, other than a point of return. The dates are cast to the wind.

And how could this horse and this skyscraper co-exist? But they do.

Look, a tiny picture of J in the garden as *The Garden*. (Michael said this isn't a good picture, which isn't true.)

And here, R in a hammock, gestating in a universe of dust and scratches. And to what will she give birth – a child, a novel, a film...

Now the two appear in a panel as angels in some wood-walled heaven. Yes, these spectral transformations happen, people become angels or ghosts or spirits, even as they are all the more a mother and daughter. Which is to say such moments fall into place and the beauty of the fall can't be denied and can even be struck onto film.

A great challenge, to take in such radiance, to accept and celebrate it, tenderly and fiercely, against fashion, against superficiality, against cynicism.

Another couple with the initials J and R. Memories of precious, precarious visits to June Leaf and Robert Frank, two beloved, intimidating, and very funny artists.

Here, an elephant, which like all elephants in this world, accrues more sadness than it deserves. (My mother once said, from her bed in the nursing home: "*The elephant and the mouse, equal in their pain.*") But this particular elephant could also be smiling, in spite of a broken tusk.

Airplanes. As we share a great love of overnight trains, Michael and I share an awed terror about air travel. We ask, how can people live under these roaring monoliths, surely too big to move through air, and how can we hurl ourselves in them from place to place? They're how we get home, that's all, and how we get away.

A section of faces, many from porcelain portraits found on tombstones, a few from official records. Some died of natural causes, but others were pulled into that European void called Holocaust or Shoah. Here, they all surface like flowers in snow.

Most are children, a fact that becomes differently unbearable to those who become parents of young children themselves. These images are, by default, re-photographed from other photographic images. The result of such recontextualizing, however, is hardly academic/theoretical, much less postmodern; strategies Michael doesn't engage in.

No, with faces of dead children who has time for such benumbed "art practice." And yet, one image is that famous shot of Anne Frank, the tilt of her head matched by an anonymous face nearby. Another is the also famous shot of a boy surrendering, from a Nazi report on the eradication of the Warsaw Ghetto. So, it becomes apparent that Michael sometimes leaves the realm of being "a photographer" in the traditional sense, just as he previously ditched the possible route of "photo-journalist." A person's got to do what a person's got to do.

A contact sheet can be a universe unto itself, an unfolding play. Benjamin (of the band, Smoke), so fragile and fearless, balances at the threshold of a bathtub in lower Manhattan's "StuyTown," back when the light there was possible, beautiful, and cheap (back when Benjamin was possible, beautiful, and cheap). He'd become Michael's dear friend; I'm proud to have introduced them, wish it could have lasted. He died in 1999.

In our films and photos, we get to have him back, we do. "A little bit."

It is probably no accident then that the gesture of the embrace recurs again and again in Michael's work. Which leads me to what may be my favorite set of pictures that he has taken, of the couple on the stairs:

To what do we owe this strange and tender record? And what is the record of?

An older man and his young girlfriend collapsed in drunken surrender... or perhaps a father and son broken together on a subway staircase? Who is holding who up? Was the man once a boxer? If the younger one is in fact a woman, is she his lover? The stairs are at once unyielding and rippling, bending and unbending.

This couple, whatever their relationship and circumstance, are attended to then in a series of photographs, equally harsh and gentle, unwrapped over time. But what time is given – minutes, hours, or an unending day or an unending night? You can just about hear the tinny loudspeakers in the background of the train station, and thinking of stations, I am reminded that the 13th station is the descent from the cross. There is no Christ here. Just the stairs, the two people and the photographer, kneeling. The actual circumstances, the truth of it, the year and the gender, hardly matter, don't matter at all. At its best, the work speaks past such details, and even beyond photography.

Another kind of panel, made from rows of instant pictures. I'll propose that such constructions are a graph of possibilities or maybe one of those puzzles where you have to slide little numbered squares around to bring a certain order. I see my brother Adam, his wife, Anna, artists, a life together. And my mother, dying, is still around here and here. I remember Michael reading Proust to her in good light in that bad room soon after her stroke, as I would again four years later, in her final passage.

These days I read a lot of strange science writing; astrophysics, cosmology, and so on, and in it encounter much dismantling of accepted notions of time. Propositions that there is no such thing as separable past, present, and future, even if these seem to be exactly all we know of the world. Einstein threw some of the biggest wrenches, demonstrating that clocks run at different speeds depending on location, and that space and time are not distinct entities but a fabric that can be stretched. (And if it can be stretched, perhaps it can even be torn.) There is talk of black holes where time could even loop around and kick itself in the ass.

Time, in its great disarray, is a specialty of Michael A. His work respects and destroys it.

We do what we can, putting nails in makeshift coffins – pulling them back out with a pliers, cameras, darkrooms, printed pictures.

Michael and I have drawn much sustenance from the work of some artists, musicians in particular, who have done heavy work. Work that is intense, serious, the opposite of trivial. Some of it could fairly be called "dark." Vic Chesnutt, Elliott Smith, Cat Power, Mark Mulcahy, Godspeed You Black Emperor!, Fugazi, Patti Smith, Benjamin...

One thing I've most wanted those who didn't know them personally to understand is that as people they were, or are, in fact down-to-earth and often funny. Very funny. Sure, they could be out of sorts, fucked up or down now and again, but rarely grave or solemn, and far from self-serious or pretentious.

Michael Ackerman fits this bill too. I've known him for a long time, some thirty years, from around when he was first finding his footing as an artist, and I value his humor now more than ever. He makes me laugh and reminds me not to take myself too seriously (which has nothing to do with not taking our work seriously.) So, I want you to know that about him, if only because it's true and just thinking about it makes me smile.

He sends me the stacked irregular panel of the birds and asks:

"Is this too much?"

I answer back only "No, it's beautiful."

Michael, cast yr doubts, aside.

## Night Shot Sleep

During the first months of Jana's life the nights were a mess. I remember her crying furiously every night, Radka would lay her down, give her her breast and wait for her to fall asleep. It took forever. And then in the middle of the night she would wake up, I don't know how many times, crying violently. Me photographing them became part of this night ritual. It wasn't easy. When Jana was falling asleep and later in the night when I heard her crying, I'd take my camera and a candle or little light, peek through the window of her room, and tell myself to go for it. Sometimes I would. Slowly I'd open the door, quietly go in, try to see them in the darkness, try to put some light on them. It was tense, I wanted to photograph, Radka wanted to sleep. But it was beautiful and I needed to do this. In her fatigue and despair Radka always thought I was coming in to help. And if I didn't help, leave us alone.

Reading this to her she reminds me of one night in Warsaw when it was 4 in the morning and Jana was crying for hours. Radka was lying helplessly on her back and Jana on Radka's stomach. Both of them exhausted and deflated. Radka heard the door open and again thought she would get some relief but then she saw a hand holding a candle like Ivan Homeless in the Master and Margarita. She saw my face and the hunger in my eyes, possessed by my need. On the nights when I didn't dare disturb them I would sit in my room, pissed off that I was missing it. After some time I started using a little video camera with a feature called Night Shot. It could see in total darkness.

From this experience I understood the crucial difference between a mother and a father. A mother has no distance. She's in, all in. Radka suffered with her child while I looked on in awe and fascination. And I understood the poverty of being a man and the perversion of being a photographer. Radka would have done anything to stop Jana's pain but I had other priorities. At around the same time someone asked me if I am able to love. I had never thought about it so simply. The answer was, and still is, no. Not enough.

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