

## Perspectives

# Tim White: Small Wonders

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*Maybe life doesn't get any better than this, or any worse, and what we get is just what we're willing to find: small wonders, where they grow. —Barbara Kingsolver*

Motherhood has changed the way I engage with photographs. Where I was once moved by the depth and complexity of a photographer's practice, I'm now drawn toward small and simple wonders. In *On Photography*, author Susan Sontag starkly asserts that "all photographs are memento mori."

**Sontag believed that** in taking a photograph, the image-maker "participates in another person (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability." Indeed, photography can disrupt, seize moments and hold inaccurate claims on truth, history and circumstance. Regardless, Sontag does not acknowledge the aspirational aspects of the medium that contribute to livelihood.

Throughout my career, I've regarded Sontag's perspective on photography as memento



*Tim White self-portrait.*

memento mori as an indelible truth. This belief began to fray during the early stages of my pregnancy. The notion of my growing child was still abstract and unimaginable, a sort of magical thinking. It was within this unknown that I recognized the dual capacity of photography as a form that both preserves and imagines. Photographing became a part of the process of pregnancy, an aspirational act that gave focus to an otherwise mysterious event. Through ultrasounds, it became a tool for peering into possibility. This practice became a daily act of dedication and a way of shepherding myself through each stage of the process.

As my lens turned increasingly inwards, Sontag's stark assessment of photography as a document of death struck me as less prescient than I'd previously believed. Photographer Emmet Gowin collaborated for decades on portraits of his wife Edith. Looking at them today, they appear tactile, knowing and alive. In one image, Edith's nude belly bulges as she holds their newborn son. In later images her fullness winnows away and her gaze becomes thinner. Gowin described their collaboration as an "art of persistence."

Similarly, photographer Tim White's images are a testament to the power of life and its



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small wonders. His practice is rooted in photography's power to envision and to uplift that which we hold dear and to celebrate the immutable nature of awe and belonging.

White eschews conceptual pretense, embracing his distinct voice. He is decidedly not a landscape photographer, preferring instead to create images that exist within place. Landscape, as defined by critic Lucy Lippard, is viewed from the outside, whereas place is engaged from within. White's intimate position is made evident through his close focal length, with images as personal as a shadow on a partner's thigh or the glassy curves of the water on Lake Superior. His photographs are a small prayer; *may it always be*.

The result is a body of work that feels akin to the echoic unfolding of a Gertrude Stein poem, wherein the richness of its content is derived from the calm sustain of what Stein calls "insistence." White's photographs are an insistence to look closely, until the stem of a ripe fruit becomes the curve of the body of a loved one.

A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass  
*A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle*

*and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.* —Gertrude Stein

**This is the** language of poetry—the reconfiguration of a rigid structure into a new form. In 1958 Robert Frank released *The Americans*, radically altering the field of American photography. His work was highly divisive, and many critics asserted that it lacked technique, with muddy exposures, poor focus and grain. Indeed, Frank captured moments with an urgency and fluidity that was poetic and chaotic at a time when Ansel Adams' "pure photography" movement was still preeminent.

Adams was a photographic straight shooter. In 1932 he founded Group f/64, a collective that espoused a "straight" vision of photography that was defined as "possessing no qualities of technique, composition or idea, derivative of any other art form." Group f/64 was created in opposition to earlier explorations of Pictorialism, an approach to photography that emphasized the beauty, tonality and composition of an image rather than the docu-



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Robert Frank was never motivated by pure technicality. He stated, "When people look at my pictures I want them to feel the way they do when they read a line of a poem twice."

*The Americans* subverted the documentary form by inviting the emotive quality of Pictorialism back into the photographic form. Tim White's photographs reveal a similar ethic; his documentation is rooted in expressive feeling and the desire to engage viewers in imaginative thought.

In his self-portrait, White's form is situated in the left-hand side of the frame. The background is in motion and the blur moves your eyes toward the curve of his hair. His head appears to be moving and his eyes are turned downward, disengaged from the viewer. In the following image, White has photographed a stack of 1960s Polaroid pictures. Curves of the mountains in the distance cut across the frame, where a man stands holding a young child (presumably White himself).

Sontag stated that by "slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." White's contemporary self-portrait stands in dialogue with these images made during his childhood years,

despite a separation of time that spans decades. Similar to Gowin's portraits of Edith, White's photograph of his family Polaroids feels both timeless and dated. His persistent engagement in the language of his past brings new life and context to these images. Photographs don't simply testify to what was, they speak to what is and what may be.

In another photograph, the left side of a woman's face gazes directly into the camera. Grass cuts upwards from the bottom, and one can sense that the camera is placed level with the subject. This photograph is followed by a hand, fractured in light and shadow, with calluses and folds. Two self-portraits; the photographer through the gaze of a loved one and an intimate examination of self. The framing of both of the images is so tight that they feel bisected, like images torn in half.

In a later passage of *On Photography*, Sontag states that "a photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. Like a wood fire in a room, photographs—especially those of people, of distant landscapes and far-away cities, of the vanished past—are incitements to reverie."

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with older images resurfacing while newer ones join the edit and then suddenly disappear. These photographs form and reform through White's ongoing appraisals, making them more akin to reveries than documents of dead moments.

**Photographs without context** often feel placeless and orphaned. In 2012, Arianna Arcara and Luca Santese released *Found Photos in Detroit*. The artists were not from Detroit and claimed to have found the images "on the streets." In the editing of the book, Arcara and Santese took vast liberties with the pairing of images, creating a new narrative of place that was damaging in its likeness to racial profiling and stereotyping. In the end, the artists created a work of pure fiction which used the visual language of truth. Photography is an unruly art form, suggestive of multiple realities. The shifting nature of each image is a testament to the duality of the medium and a livelihood that extends beyond the author.

White's images are never titled. They float through time, meandering in and out of his edits, and all share a similar visual language. Yet, they are rooted in place and in a sustained way of seeing and engaging.

In this moment of photographic history when photography is increasingly tasked with social responsibility, White's work is a necessary reminder that the personal is political. Making an image can be a prayer and an act of the will. In Sontag's criticism, the power of photography became relegated to the form of death—a tool for silencing. There is a profound truth in this assessment, yet we need to regard its power to form and imagine the future. Sometimes a photograph need only be as large as the echo of a poem read twice.

#### **Addendum**

*Tim White is a Minneapolis photographer. He writes for Black & White and other print and online publications. His 2016 book In and Out of Context paired images with poetry and verse from 21 Minnesota writers. You can view his photographs at [timwhite.is](http://timwhite.is), and at [www.instagram.com/timwhite\\_dlh](http://www.instagram.com/timwhite_dlh). He also shoots color, with equal facility and fluency.*







