

I'm a cross-cut saw, won't you drag me 'cross your log.

—Traditional blues song attributed to Sam Chapman.

In the months it has taken to prepare this book and the exhibition it accompanies, Michael Bishop has made several trips to Chicago from his current home in Rochester, New York. On those visits, one of his favorite after-work entertainments has been a late night tour of some of the blues clubs for which the city is famous. On a recent such Southside foray, the thought came to me that Bishop's work bears comparison with Chicago's only indigenous form of musical expression (and with the bluegrass, swing, country-and-western, "rockabilly," and other kinds of vernacular music that make up the largest part of Bishop's personal record library). That correspondence goes beyond the balls-y, macho aggressiveness Bishop's work shares with that of, say, a Buddy Guy or a Jimmy Rogers. It goes beyond their shared straightforwardness and seeming simplicity of form (aren't blues music and lyrics as "symmetrical" as many of Bishop's pictures?), and even further than the similar use of irony, wit, and double-entendre.

Blues music is often—and falsely—read as a reliance on form at the expense of content. The music commonly uses familiar motifs, and the audience predictably (and, some would say, intuitively) responds with the tapping fingers, swaying bodies, moving feet that none but the most jaded listeners can seem to suppress. The blues audience knows the formula, usually well enough to be surprised and charmed when the musician introduces some unexpected variation on it. Indeed, one measure of a skillful performer is in his ability to mix the already-accepted with the unique.

But the accomplished songwriter knows that to get people dancing with their bodies is to open their minds in a way that would be difficult to do by any other

method. Blues lyrics—at once unobtrusive yet forceful—range from radical political and social commentary, to poetry about the most basic human desires and deepest human emotions; they are almost never gratuitous. More important, the blues musician relates the music to the lyrics so as to further explicate the meaning of the piece as a whole.

I think that a lot of Michael Bishop's photographs work in much the same way, relying on style as an entry into, and a component of, the total statement. Though we might think of him as a "formalist," consider his pictures in relation to the non-objective painting of the last twenty-odd years, to which they bear at least a superficial resemblance: "they remain," as Andy Grundberg has pointed out in *Art in America* (July-August 1977), "resolutely and insistently photographic." This isn't only because they have, as virtually all lens-imaged photographs do, a "subject," but because that aspect is important to the meaning of the final picture, as Bishop indicates by his consistency in choice and treatment of the subject.

This is most apparent in the large monochromatic images he produced between 1972 and 1975 (Bishop calls them the *Tones*, as opposed to the *Chromes* done from 1974 to the present). During that time, the pictures he made were tightly cropped, strictly organized glimpses of some of the physical structures we, as a society, create, and the tools we used to make them. It's significant that Bishop chooses to photograph objects that we have made to control—quite literally—ourselves, each other, and the forces of nature. Fences, guard rails, safety horses, traffic control devices, street signs, aqueducts, sidewalks, and walls appear again and again, and the appearance of "flatness" that Bishop introduces (and which help earn him the label of formalist) heightens the impression of impregnability and strict limitation of our ability to "enter" the picture.

The tools and machines that appear in Bishop's pictures also suggest this idea of physical control, for what we are shown is not the sleek, modern exterior of a computer or some other product of our electronic technology—which for many would inspire awe of a magic they don't quite understand—but the guts of an engine or the blade of a plow—symbols of raw physical power which an individual man or woman could never counter. The fact that most of the objects that appear in Bishop's pictures are the kind of utilitarian products that are manufactured and put to use as stripped-down skeletons which reveal their own structure (it's apparent that they have been *constructed*, with each bolt and rivet bared), suggests that a human consciousness wields, or at least has instilled, that power—a far more disconcerting idea than that of the beneficent super-brain we might think of as residing somewhere at the center of a computer.

Words as they appear on street signs, billboards, and such appear often in Bishop's *Tones* pictures. Poets long ago realized the special power of the single word or phrase, torn from its original context (or shielded from a potential one), and allowed to dart freely from connotation to connotation, mind to mind. Most of Bishop's words are negative commands (he'd have us think it's because they happen to get in the way of his camera, and those, after all, are the words likely to show up in pictures made on the street): Do Not; No Ballplaying Allowed; Do Not Enter; One Way. Arrows point us in one direction, then another, then three ways at once.

The pictures themselves, with their graphic blatentness and intensity, often read like orders: Stop. Look At This. It's here, it's beautiful in some way, frightening certainly. Even in the more recent color work, many of the same subjects and concerns are carried forward, though in a less didactic, perhaps more playfully

inquisitive way. But it all seems to be part of the same effort he defined for me recently when he told me, "I'm just trying to make some sense out of that mess out there."

THIS PUBLICATION SURVEYS only the last seven years of Michael Bishop's photography. Though he was born in just 1946 (September 26, Palo Alto, CA), this period represents less than half of a nearly incredible career in terms of its richness of ideas, and even in terms of the sheer volume of work produced. Given that he learned photography in sixth grade, held his first professional job (printing color for a commercial photographer) in junior high school, and by high school was working steadily in photography (in a job for an industrial photographer), it is not surprising that work he produced as an undergraduate at San Francisco State College already contained the germ of ideas still current for him today.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is Bishop's interest in the space in front of the camera—how it is translated in the photograph, and our interpretation of that translation. One group of student photographs, made shortly before he received an MA degree from San Francisco State in 1971, consisted of double prints made "in-camera" by masking first one half, then the other, of the lens. By pointing the camera at different angles for each of the two exposures, he was able to create the kind of spatial ambiguities so disconcerting in the single images he makes now.

During 1971-72 Bishop concentrated on a group of pictures he calls the *Space/Technology Series*. The series began as pictures of deserted, "moonscape"-like areas (such as the Bonneville Salt Flats) to which he added multiple cross-hairs to suggest the scientific photographs often collected by satellites and astronauts. It eventually

expanded to include hundreds of pseudoscientific documents, made by a variety of techniques (some of my favorites incorporated photograms of plastic model parts of spacemen and their weapons and tools).

Bishop sees the *Space/Technology* pictures as something of a diversion (though a fruitful one of which he is quite proud) from the main course of his work. Indeed, Charles Hagen's point that the *Tones* and *Chromes* are largely an examination of visual perception (and the camera's role in shaping it) indicates how useful that mode can be in discussing these pictures. But look, too, at the subject both denoted and implied by the *Space/Technology* photographs: certainly they are about our place in a highly technological society, and the alienation which such a society seems to breed. Thus, the series can be seen to be clear and logical introduction to the work which forms this book.

Michael Bishop has been awarded two fellowships by the National Endowment for the Arts (1975, 1978), and a Creative Artists Public Service grant (New York State Council on the Arts, 1977). His work is in numerous private and university collections, and in the permanent collections of the following museums: International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House (Rochester, NY), Musee d'Arles (France), Museum of Fine Arts (St. Petersburg, FL), Museum of Modern Art (New York), National Museum of Canada (Ottawa), and the Oakland Museum (California).

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