

ROGER MERTIN



RECORDS 1976-78

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Edited and with an afterword by
Charles Desmarais

Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography
Columbia College, Chicago, Illinois 60605

This book accompanies an exhibition of eighty 8x10-inch contact prints, selected from the nearly 700 produced by Roger Mertin during 1976 and 1977. The exhibition was held at the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, from June 16 to July 29, 1978. Among the many people who provided assistance in preparing the exhibition and publication, several deserve special credit: Thomas Kato, Ruta Lietuvninkas, Bill Miller, Helen Neafsey, Tae Terumoto, and Carol Williams. Supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Roger Mertin: Records 1976-78

cover Upstate N.Y. 1977

7 White City 1977

9 Hailey, Idaho 1976

10 Pa. Roadside 1977

11 N.Y. Roadside 1977

13 Webster, N.Y. 1977

14 Wyoming 1977

15 Irondequoit, N.Y. 1977

16 Sylvan Lake, N.Y. 1977

N.Y. Roadside 1977

17 South of Rochester 1978

Holcomb, N.Y. 1977

19 Conesus Lake, N.Y. 1977

20 White City 1977

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22 Chittenango, N.Y. 1977

23 Wisc. 1977

25 Michaela, Wisc. 1977

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M., Rochester Backyard 1977

29 N.Y. Roadside 1977

30 N.Y. Roadside 1977

31 N.Y. Roadside 1977

32 Tree, Stratford, Conn. 1977

33 Stratford, Conn. 1977

34 Poultneyville Orchard 1977

35 Poultneyville Orchard 1977

37 Lake Rd. (N.Y. Roadside) 1977

39 Sylvan Beach 1977

41 Rochester Backyard 1977

Webster, N.Y. 1977

N.Y. Roadside 1977

Mich. Roadside 1977

Pa. Roadside 1977

Deans, Colo. 1977

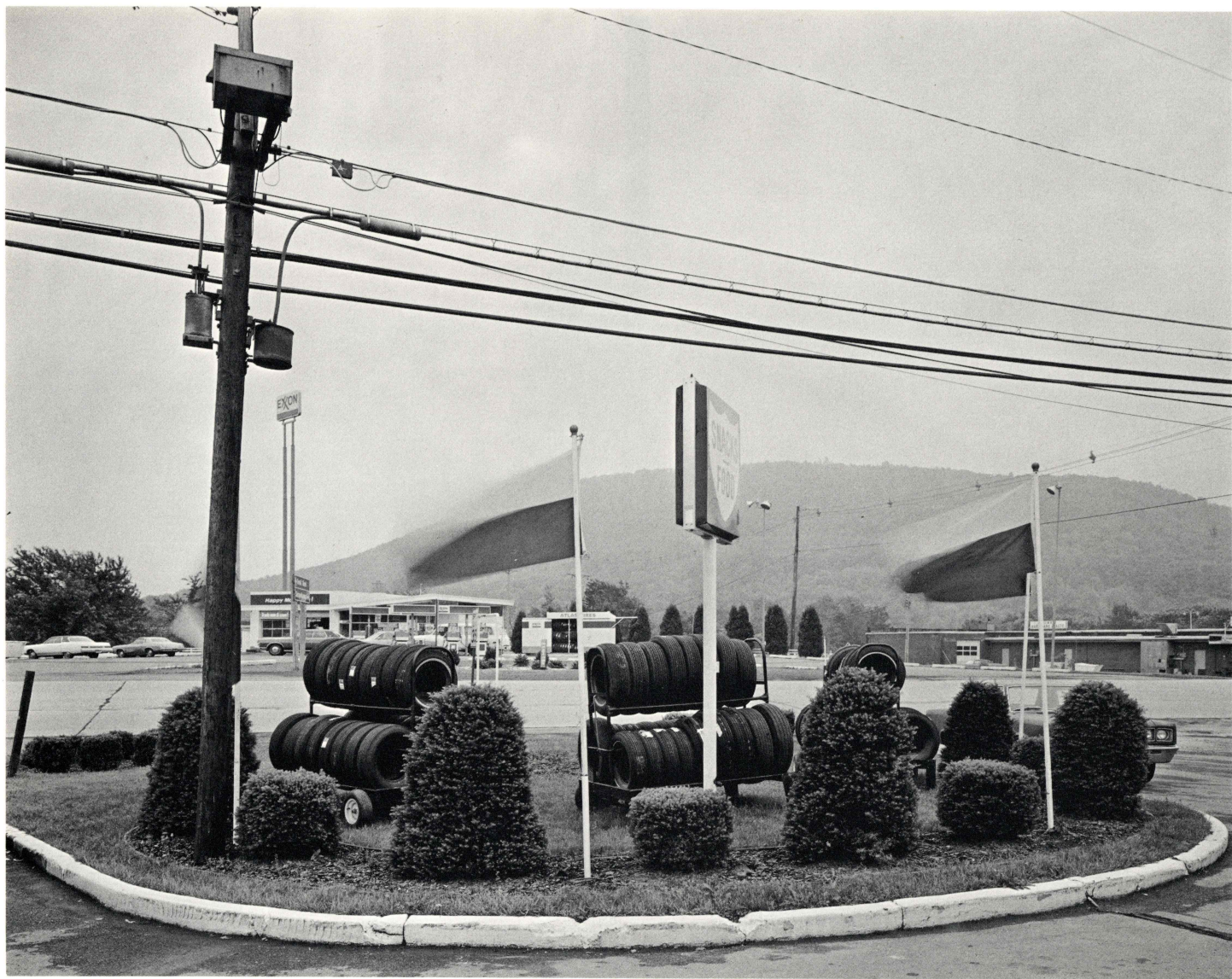
M., Mendon Ponds 1977

Laurie, Bridgehampton, N.Y. 1977

M. 1977



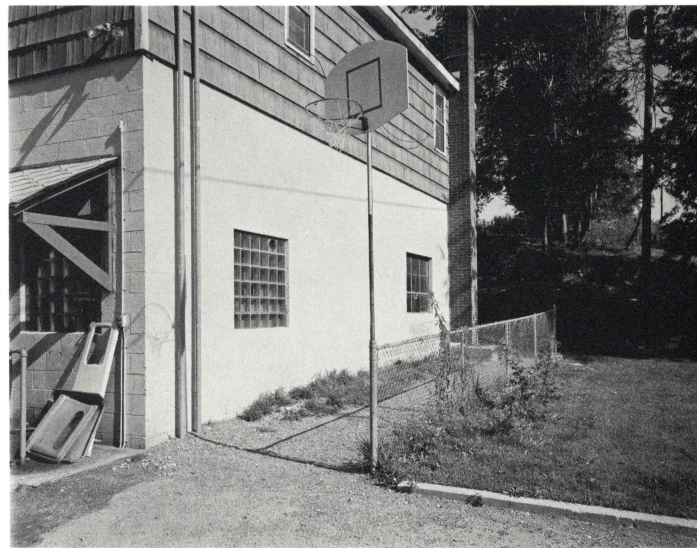
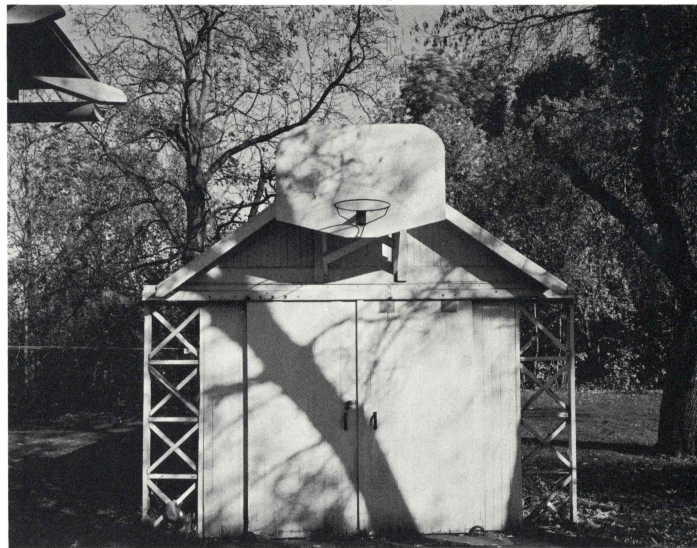


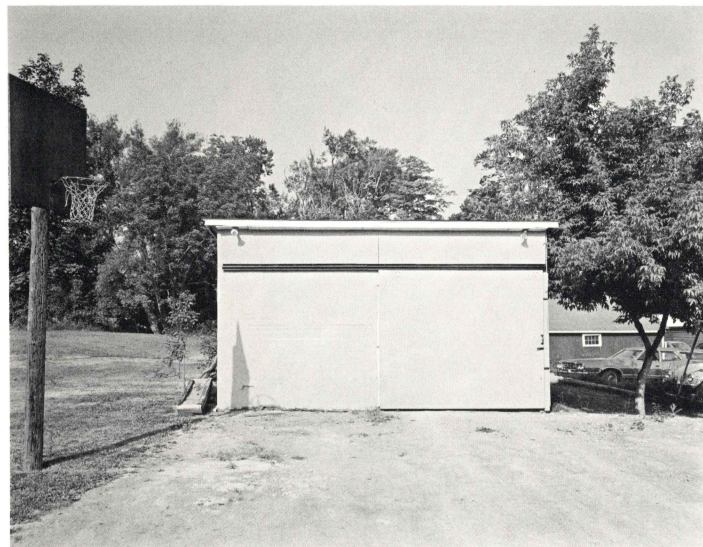














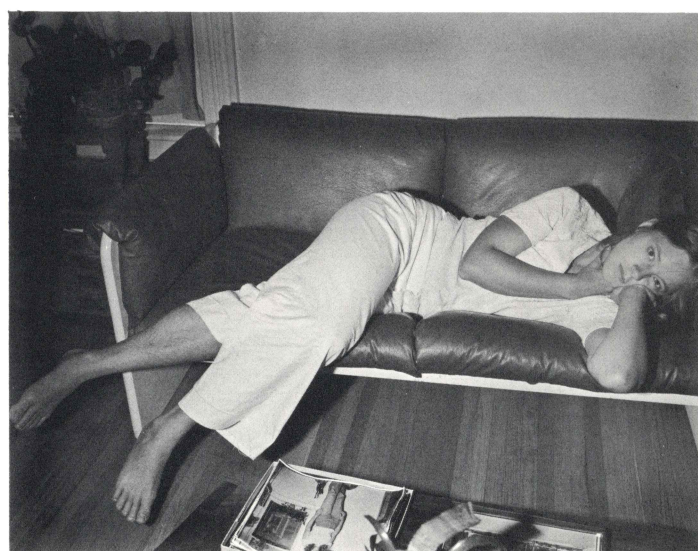
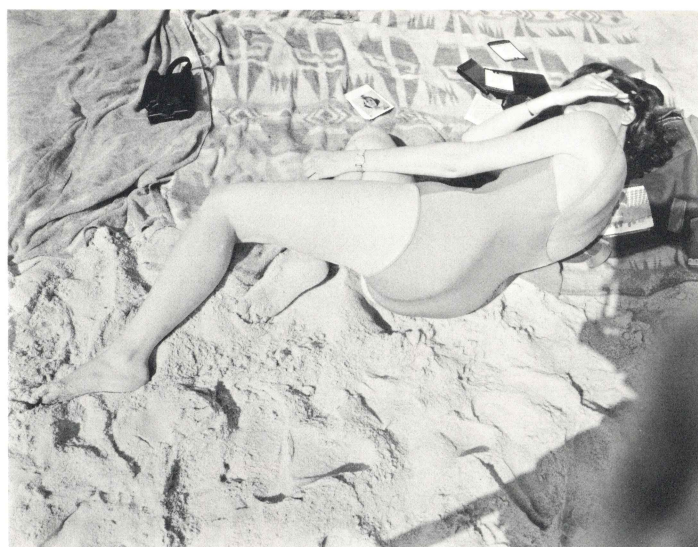












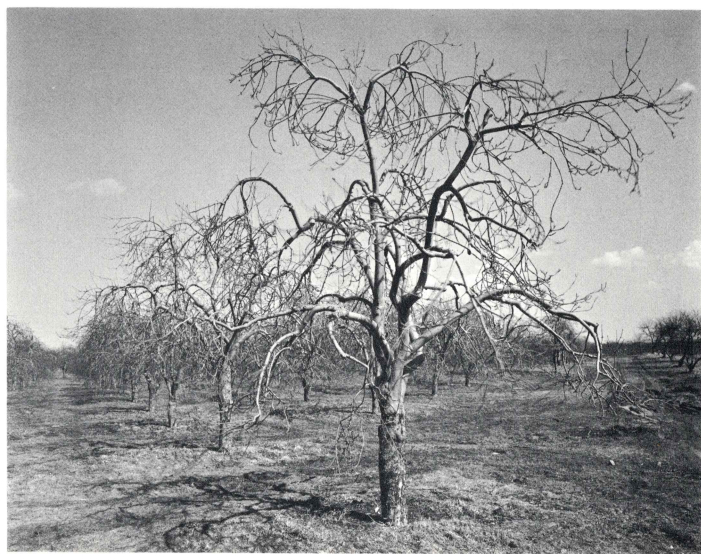
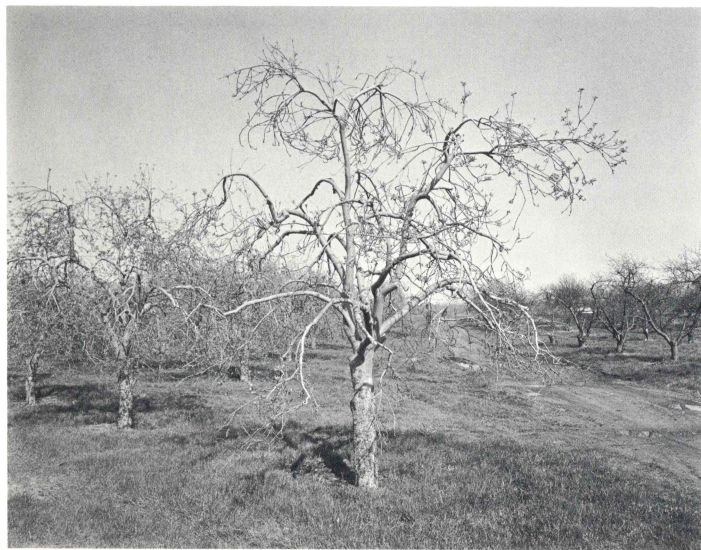
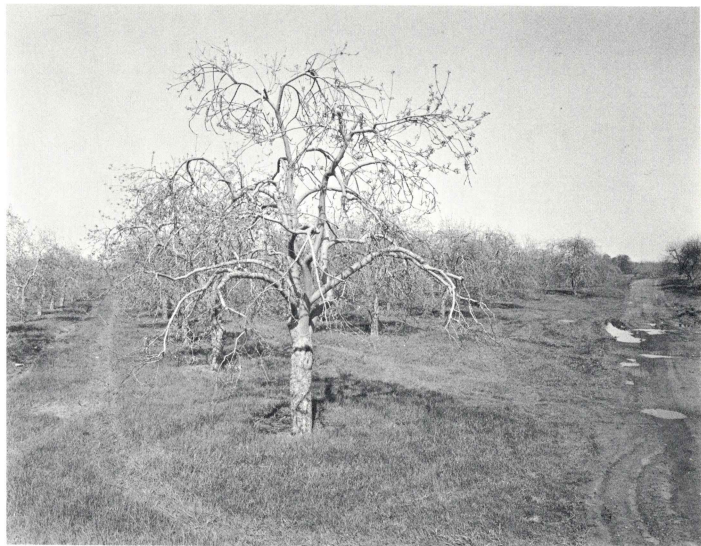
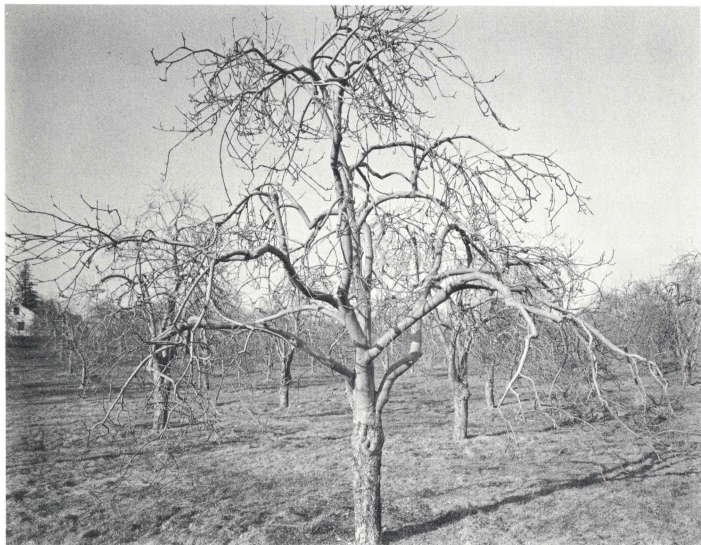


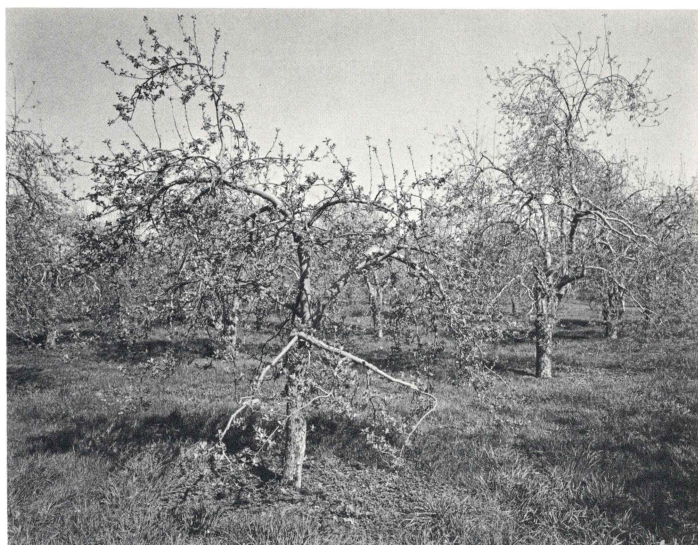
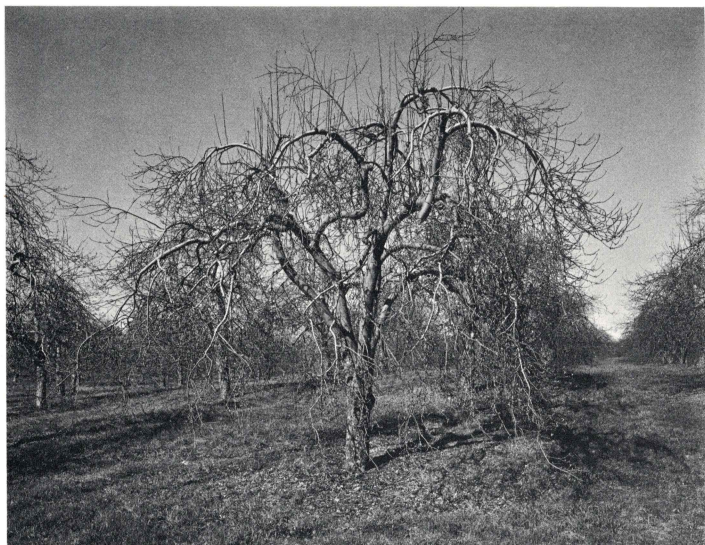


















It seems wise to avoid broad, definitive statements about the significance of any current historical circumstance. It's not only that we are too near our own time to see it clearly; it's that time has this way of transforming what really is true today into tomorrow's lie. To use a descriptor like "perfect" (a word one curator spent a few years ago on a then-new discovery) is to carelessly expose the contemporary artist and critic to the risk of history's whims. At any rate, there seems to be no need to attach so inaccurate and bloodless a term to Roger Mertin's new photographs.

"Representative" might be more useful. Though ordinary, the word successfully ducks the romantic assertion that an artist is somehow superior to the rest of society. At the same time, its common usage in a variety of contexts makes it only richer as a reference to Mertin. We can show, for instance, that his work synthesizes that of a number of less "complete" photographers, or that the pictures represent their subjects with an intellectual and emotional accuracy that approaches knowledge and love. Most important, Mertin the artist and man is also typical as a reflection of the world in which he works and is a particularly capable spokesman for our time and society.

All art, of course, is a product of numerous social forces in addition to the individual artist's personality. Painters didn't stop painting soup cans and kitschy nudes and frosting-laden cakes just because they got tired of the way they were working, or even only because everyone else was doing it. Pop Art was a response to a time when the excesses of our culture — and the implications of those excesses — were especially apparent. Pop and its abstract counterpart, Op, gave way to the cooler, more detached Photorealist, Minimal, and Conceptual modes at exactly the same time as the riots, the war, and the demonstrations were slacking off. More recently, increased public interest in and

patronage of the arts surely has had something to do with the current artistic concern with narrative, content, and meaning. In photography, we need only compare Lee Friedlander's aggressive, people-cancelling pictures of the alienated '60s to his witty and melancholy work of today for an apt illustration of the point.

Roger Mertin's *Plastic Love Dream* (1968) was an image of confinement and suffocation. His *Trees* (1971-76) were startled and transformed by stark flash lighting into delicate filaments of glass, moody dancers, grumbling grotesques. Each series was, in the metaphorical sense, a document of its time. They are interpretations — manipulations — in which we can find evidence of the world view held by their maker.

The new work presented here takes as its subjects the often ignored symbols of American culture which line every back road and state highway. But Mertin's attitude is not the sarcastic one with which most photographers of the '60s and early '70s would have viewed the kitsch of our social landscape. It embodies, instead, a respect for these subjects and the people who have created them, and an honest attempt to *understand* — rather than interpret — their meaning as cultural artifacts.

This new, truly contemporary view of the peopled American landscape incorporates a re-presentation of that meaning, and at the same time proves our new-found ability to accept things as they are, and for their intrinsic beauty. It represents our acknowledgement that "politics" as defined and practiced in the 1960s was an inane reduction of life issues to slogans and simplistic solutions. It replaces the bound and plastic-enshrouded nude (*Plastic Love Dream's* symbol of frustration, alienation, and fear) with a complex (and for that reason "realistic") panorama that mixes contexts of personal and cultural symbol, life and decay, nature

and society, order and confusion.

The pictures are Mertin's attempt to combine a subtle and original mastery of form with myriad levels of content. By "content" I do not only mean subject matter, though most of his pictures certainly start at their nominal subjects. Take the two *Stratford, Conn.*, pictures on pages 32 and 33, for example. In structure they are clean and elegant. They record a fairly typical New England village crossroads and contain, individually and as a pair, a great deal of information about such crossroads. But they also have the trees, which seem instilled with an animated life. One tree has been roped and seems on the verge of a last-ditch fight for its freedom. The other stalks the green like a tyrannosaurus, and seems about to attack the more conventional tree at the edge of the street.

This fantasy of trees as animate creatures had been a common theme in Mertin's work for several years. His approach changed, though, when he started working with a view camera. He decided to seek out the trees that already suggested the kind of life he thought they had, rather than invent what he wanted with flash and 35mm camera.

The pictures record, too, the undeniable fact of the integration of our natural and constructed environments. Any "natural wilderness" today is wild only because we are intentionally designing the world to include wild places. Roger Mertin sees the blending of the natural and the controlled as the most potent symbol of our time, and his embrace of that blend is the root of his basic optimism.

Mertin's recurring inclusion of personal symbols — trees, and specifically evergreens — and his obsessive recording of symbols of the culture — notably, of course, the basketball hoops as well as the man-altered

landscape — are what set him apart from other view camera photographers working in a somewhat similar vein. Stephen Shore, for instance, can make an interesting color photograph in the most mundane of situations, and that seems to be the statement of his work: it is an attempt to organize and beautify a chaotic and banal environment. For Shore, anything is photographable (he recently finished a series on the New York Yankees) because the picture is the point of it all.

In Mertin, one has the idea that one is seeing a *specific* place, which may stand for the macrocosm but which maintains its individuality. Stratford is his hometown. Rochester is where he now lives and where most of these pictures were made. The photographs are responses to situations or events which are already a part of his life, and not merely products of the search for an excuse to take a picture.

Nowhere is this distinction more evident than in the portraits, which are made with a casualness that forces us to believe that it really is the people who matter. Over the last few years, Mertin has shot hundreds of SX-70 portraits — simple head shots that the subjects are asked to autograph. The view camera portraits are an extension of that project. Informed by the snapshot, they also incorporate other elements that make them something more — the gesture of one leg as it dips to touch a toe to the water's surface, a wave that breaks exactly at the figure's waist.

The portraits are an essential part of the total project because the project is Mertin's access to the world. He collects people in the same way that he collects basketball hoops and apple trees. These collections allow him (and us) to compare the members of the class and to determine, ultimately, their substantial and essential differences.

If this kind of collecting activity recalls Eugene Atget or Walker Evans, it's not in the least surprising. Mertin's work is packed with references to photography. But Atget and Evans, in particular, are the spiritual well-springs on which he draws. It's not only that each was a documentarian of his culture (a great many people have attempted that), but each of them found a way to inject into his pictures the suggestion of a personal truth that paralleled the half-truths described by the lens.

Few social scientists believe claims of objectivity anymore, and Mertin's undisguised search for personal symbols to include in his photographs serves to clearly

indicate his presence as the data-gatherer. But the inclusion of the personal is also necessary because those personal responses are as much a part of the event recorded as the details of a signboard.

There is no such thing as objectivity. There's no such thing as perfection. Mertin shows that it is possible to know these things, accept them, and love them about the world.

Charles Desmarais
Director

Roger Mertin (born Bridgeport, Conn., October 9, 1942) has exhibited and published his photographs widely, both in this country and internationally. His work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the International Museum of Photography (Rochester, N.Y.), the Museum of Modern Art, and in numerous university and private collections. In 1974 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography, and has been similarly honored by the New York State Council on the Arts (1974) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1976). He is currently on the faculty of the University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.

The Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography at Columbia College presents an on-going schedule of important exhibitions of contemporary photography, publishes monographs and catalogues for its members and the public, sponsors lectures and other activities, and generally does what it can to contribute to an understanding of photography as practiced today. For membership information, write the Chicago Center for Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60605.

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