

Be it ever so humble

Adams' photos
of the mundane:
what they say

The camera is voracious. An idle camera on a shelf might be a gleaming sculptural object, but a camera in use is a living thing. It doesn't just aid us in seeing and remembering, it shapes vision and memory. It dictates its own terms. It is never satisfied.

It attaches itself to us and enters our lives. Give a child a camera and she will quickly begin to point and shoot ... add a photo function to the telephone and adults will share a billion pictures a day ... all driven by the same urge the late Garry Winogrand said impelled him: to see what the world looks like in a photograph.

The earliest photograph we have was made by an inventor who pointed the camera out his window. It was the well-lighted subject nearest at hand — rooftops seen

Robert Adams: Around the House: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 11-5 Saturdays. Through April 23. Fraenkel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 981-2661. www.fraenkelgallery.com.

from an attic studio. Notwithstanding the great public uses of the medium, the art history of photography is studded with such intimate observations, from Edward Weston's picture of a green pepper in the bowl of a kitchen funnel to Emmet Gowin's steamy backyard family album.

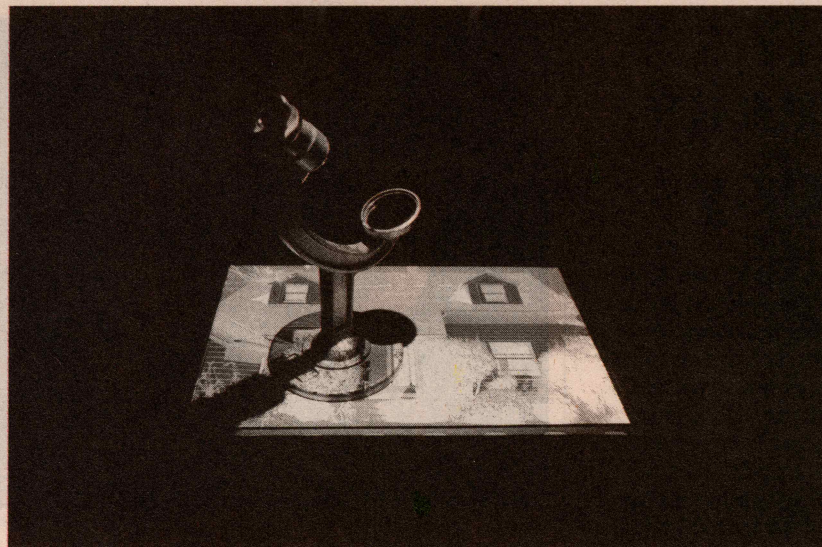
Robert Adams knows better than most the wiles and demands of the camera. A MacArthur Fellow who has influenced his medium and a broad public audience through his deeply pensive images of the American West, he is an important artist, among the best-known photographers alive.

What to make, then, of "Around the House," his 14th solo exhibition at Fraenkel Gallery, and the book — the latest of nearly 50 — of the same title? Consisting of roughly 70 pictures, it catalogs incidental moments and inconsequential corners of the home he shares with his wife in Oregon, detailing the

Desmarais continues on E3



Fraenkel Gallery photos



Photos from Robert Adams' "Around the House" at Fraenkel Gallery through April 23. The show catalogs incidental moments and inconsequential corners of the home he shares with his wife in Oregon, detailing the house and its yard in the shifting light of day.

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Everything looks perfectly normal

Desmarais from page E1

house and its yard in the shifting light of day.

To be sure, it is (in the parlance) “closely observed,” but it’s full of seemingly haphazard particulars and tossed-off visual phrases. The corner of a table intruding awkwardly upon a portrait of a carved angel. Several mostly-out-of-focus pictures of leaves and underbrush. Pictures of the same vase of nasturtium leaves from three different angles. A moth at rest on white house siding. Images of his wife, but only from the back, face obscured.

Is this a casually virtuoso performance on the order of the best jazz or late J.M.W. Turner? Or the twee ruminations of a cooped-up romantic nearing his 80th year?

It’s a bit of both, I think. Adams is not the kind of artist who lets mistakes go public unless he sees more in the fault than in his original intention. In that important sense, he is in control. He is aware, and undaunted, that directing his camera to the sky can only recall Alfred Stieglitz’s great series of “Equivalents” — pictures of clouds meant to evoke the spiritual — and, by extension, all the ennobled homely instants with which Stieglitz earned a place as one of history’s greatest American artists. A picture of a bowl of tomatoes is, above all else, a riff on that Weston pepper.

The sequence of photographs in the book and at the gallery takes us from bright morning to deep dusk. Taken as a whole, it is as much a poem — an ode to

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the quotidian — as a document. Those cloud pictures (19 of them) are the slowly shifting refrain. As a celebration of a life lived well, it is a lovely personal document. But as a work of art addressed to the rest of us, its time may have passed.

In 1994, Adams published a book of essays called “Why People Photograph.” (Beyond his fabled skill as a photographer, Adams is an excellent writer.) It is a book I would recommend to anyone taken with the art of photography; rereading parts of it this week leaves me with a renewed sensitivity to artists I have not considered for years. One key phrase — pulled as a quote on the dust jacket — is problematic, though. “We make pictures ... to honor what is greater and more interesting than we are,” he writes.

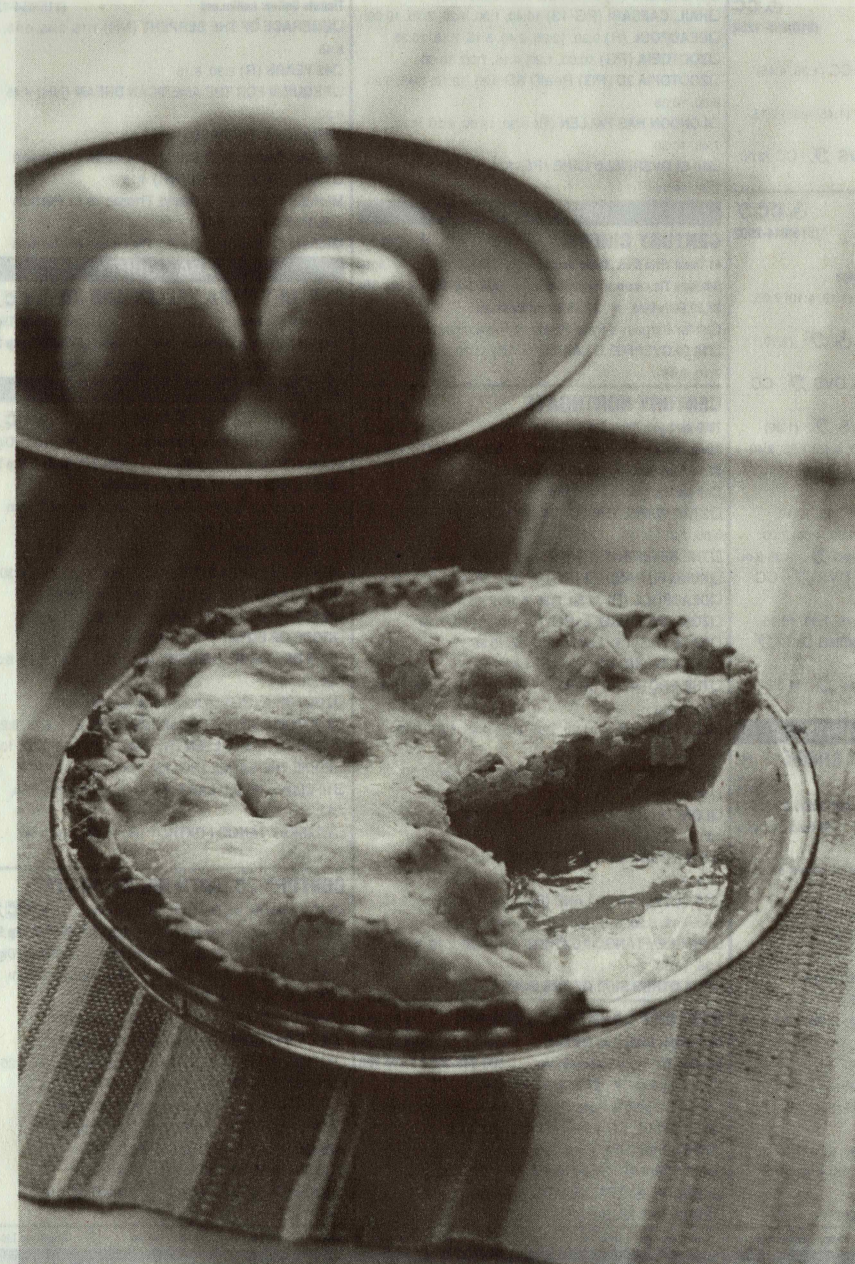
Regardless of its suitability to his current project, it is a dated proposition, composed before we learned from Facebook and Instagram why, actually, people do make photographs. For it is the “share” function of social media, above all, that drives the mad doubling-time of the world’s archive of photographs. It’s a function that, despite its name, is primarily one-way in operation: We share to be “liked.”

We photograph our food, our pets, our colorful socks and silly hats. It is all about us — an urge that has reached its apotheosis, of course, with the exponential proliferation of the selfie.

For a successful person on Adams’ (and my) side of 60, there are only two root fears: death and irrelevancy. For most creative people, they amount to the same thing.

If for that reason alone, I would click “like.”

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Fraenkel Gallery photos

Photos by Robert Adams, “Around the House” at Fraenkel Gallery, including one of his wife, top — seemingly haphazard particulars and tossed-off visual phrases