

Glacial shift

Brett Weston: Voyage of the Eye
Afterword by Beaumont Newhall
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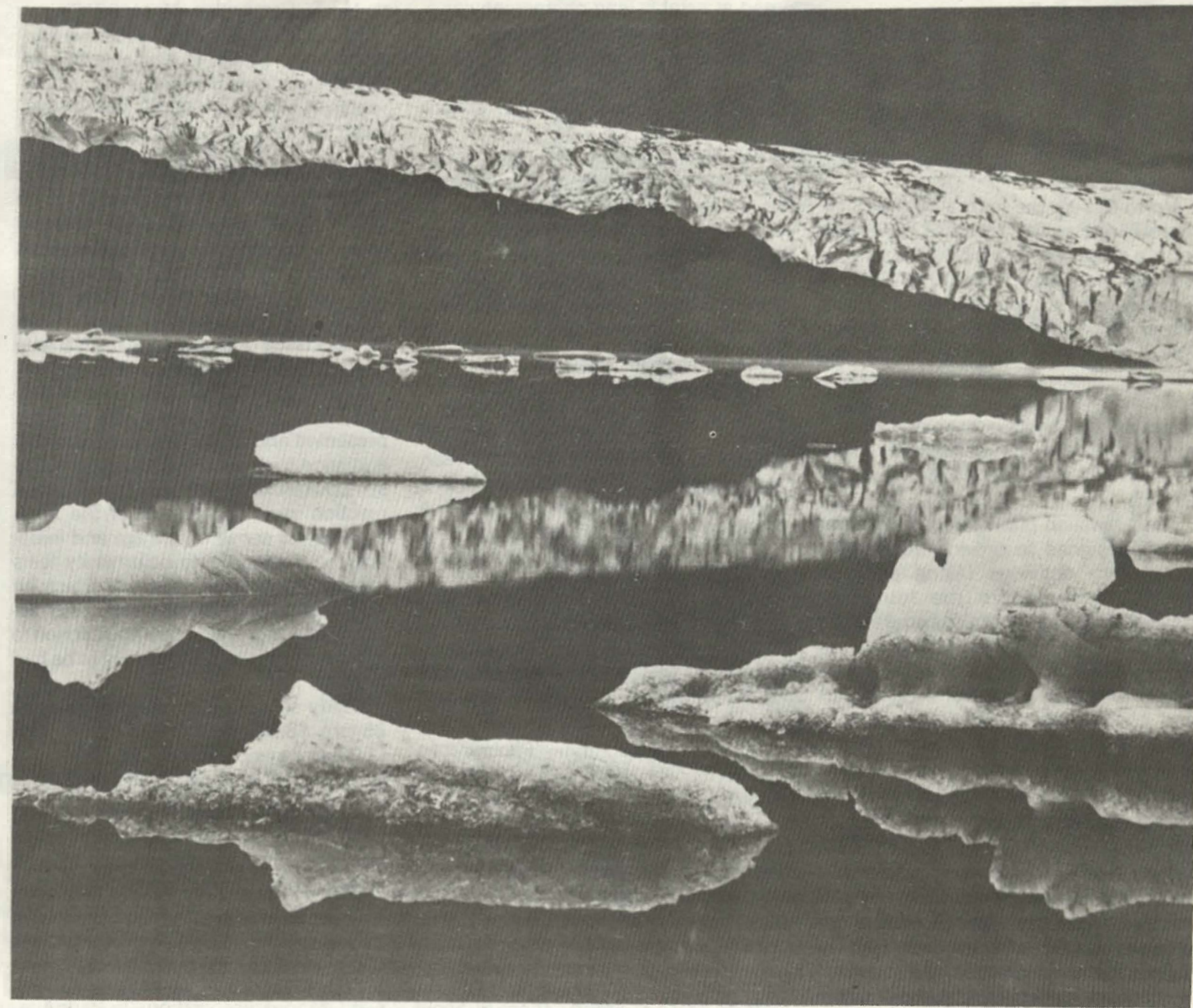
Brett Weston is a man with a love of simplicity, a certain distaste for change, and very strong opinions. These characteristics, made visible through his uncomplicated lifestyle, are especially apparent in his photographic methods and attitudes. For years he insisted upon using large view cameras for all but his rare portrait work. He still considers the use of a light meter superfluous, if not a sign of weak technique. His pictures, too, have always had a kind of static quality, both internally in their perfect, lifeless balance, and in their non-evolutionary relationship to one another.

Yet it is change and growth which are the foundation of creativity, and in a way which contradicts what he **says** about photography — in a non-verbal, perhaps even unconscious way — Brett Weston's late work demonstrates a subtle shift to slightly more flexible technical dicta, and significant changes in the content of his pictures.

Much has been made of Weston's gradually increasing use of a Rolleiflex camera given to him about 1968. The small camera (as compared to the 8x10 and 11x14 he still sometimes employs) provides a good deal of versatility, and the long lenses he uses with it flatten the space in his pictures to a degree not apparent in his large format work. He also seems, in the last 10 years or so, to have applied the short tonal range used in his well-known abstractions from details of the world, to his broader landscapes. Full-scale prints have practically disappeared from his repertoire, to be replaced by low key pictures filled with swatches and chunks of the deepest black. The new Aperture monograph reproduces many recent photographs which show this to be so.

Included, too, is an apparently recent print of **Garapata Beach**, 1954. A comparison of this print to an earlier version of the same photograph also supports the hypothesis that he has altered his way of working. Black splinters and thick, dark wedges intrude upon the smooth expanse of sand in this new picture, replacing the transparent shadows of **Garapata** as presented in Weston's 1956 book, **Brett Weston Photographs** (Merle Armitage, ed., New York: E. Weyhe), and in an original print at the George Eastman House. Assuming the reproduction of the Aperture book to be at least somewhat close to Weston's current prints, his conception of **Garapata** seems to have changed from a record of an idyllic bit of Pacific shoreline to the creation of a vaguely strange and inhospitable environment.

Weston's propensity for strong tonal contrast has been interpreted by critics as an emphasis on form, too often at the expense of meaning. But the strongest work of the last five to ten years shows a shift from the design-y abstraction of, say, **Reflections through Window**, 1954, (dated 1955 in the Armitage book), or the purely shape-oriented broken windows, ice bubbles, and cracked mud of past years. Those earlier works relied upon Weston's ability to disguise the original subject in the formalities of shape and composition. The new photographs retain a tenuous but real identification with their referents. We know what the subjects are, yet we also know that they have been transformed. The harsh contrasts lend an unreality to the scenes, suggesting jet black skies (as in **Mendenhall Glacier**, 1973, or **Snow Slide**, **Alaska**, 1973) or giving the impression of reversed tones, as though in negative (**Bamboo Forest**, 1970, **Bristle Cone Pine**



Brett Weston, **Mendenhall Glacier, Alaska**, 1973

Bark, Torn Poster, The Netherlands, 1971, **Burned Linoleum**, 1971).

A disregard for the traditional concept of deep, receding space, not apparent in his earlier landscapes, has also become apparent. Often it is a simple foreshortening which occurs, as in **Logging Ponds, Oregon**, 1972, where rows of grasses in the foreground, middle ground, and lining a far bank are stacked one above the other in the well-worn photographic paraphrase of oriental perspective. But at times Weston achieves a synthesis of perspective and tonal contrast, as he does in **Snow Slide, Alaska**, 1973, which allows him to play havoc with our perception.

Snow Slide presents a simple composition of a dark field roughly divided vertically by a number of white streaks. Close inspection reveals, at the very bottom of the image, a minute Volkswagen bus (the photographer's?) on the thinnest line of road. The immensity of the mountain which fills the frame is stunning enough in its reality. But we also receive the impression of a black sky from which drips some unhealthy liquid which threatens to envelope bus and road. **Snow Slide** epitomizes the recent products of Brett Weston's camera, establishing as it does a substitute world of darkness tinged with menace. It is ambiguous both in orientation (spatially) and in meaning. Weston has achieved a level of complexity he rarely even attempted before, say, 1965, and rarely accomplished before this decade.

To make this step, Weston had to bend a little. The narrow limits of the medium as defined by a "straight" technique of pre-visualized, unmanipulated, full-scale prints from the largest negative possible have proved incapable of containing his altered concept of the world. But the unbending Weston, loath to give up this assumedly "pure" way of working, has found a way to adapt it to make it **look** as though he has. (Often the effect is all the more interesting for our knowledge that it was produced with a minimum of manipulation.) Thus, for instance, he makes pictures which look as though they could have been produced in the

evening with a strobe on his camera (**Swamp Grasses**, 1973, **Forest, Dead and Burnt**, 1973). In one sense, it is the whole of photography as it has developed since he began his photographic life which has influenced Weston.

Especially interesting in connection with the question of antecedents are the "negative images" already referred to, as well as others which are related even more closely to the final work of the late Wynn Bullock. **Burnt Wharf, Oregon**, 1972, and **Rock Forms**, 1970, not only look like negatives, but they are similar in many other respects (subject matter, composition) to Bullock's photographs.

Parallels can be found, too, in the apparent interest of both men in altering perspective. (One picture in the new Weston book is startling in its correspondence to certain Bullock prints. **Tide Pool, Oregon**, 1974, looks much like Bullock's upside-down photographs, and upon scrutiny one discovers that indeed it **was** printed upside-down. It is doubtful that Weston intended the inversion, but the printer's mistake itself may say something about the perspectival ambiguity of some of his images.) It would be counter-productive to belabor the similarity between their work, but there is biographical evidence which supports

Brett Weston, **Bamboo Forest, Japan**, 1970



the theory in the fact that Weston rarely looks at others' work. He prefers showing his occasional informal students his own work, to criticizing theirs; he doesn't seem to attend many shows outside of a quick stroll through a Friends of Photography opening now and then, and possesses few photographic books or monographs. But living something like eight miles apart in an area which respects and shows its artists more than most, the two men could hardly have avoided each other's work. And Bullock was the one Carmel-area photographer who could have provided any challenge to Weston's eye and mind.

When one writes of Brett Weston, one must inevitably bore one's audience with at least a few lines about his famous father and his incredibly important role

in Brett's life and work. Brett is, of course, a psychoanalyst's dream in his reinterpretation of his father's lifestyle, from his fruit-and-nut breakfasts to his pipe-smoking **machismo**. But his most derivative images have always been accompanied by work which was distinctly "Brett Weston" (his abstractions have often been used to illustrate this point), and it may be that the derivations have been a deliberate working-through of the inescapable influence. As if in blatant affirmation of his roots, two of the most Edward Weston-like pictures in **Voyage of the Eye** are printed on facing pages. **Rock Forms, Point Lobos**, 1970 could almost be taken for Edward's **Point Lobos**, 1930, so nearly identical are they. The impression of déjà-vu caused by the other photo, **Eroded Rocks, Pebble Beach**,

1966, is mitigated somewhat by direct comparison of the picture to its counterpart, **Eroded Rock No. 51**, 1930, but there can be no doubt as to the source of the later work.

One might well question whether Weston's "new vision" is new at all, or only a reiteration of problems already competently dealt with by the Surrealist movement in painting, or perhaps by Bullock or such latter-day photographic "surrealists" as Ralph Gibson. Yet to see indications of growth and movement, however belated or slow in coming, in an artist who has symbolized for some the decadence of a philosophy once referred to as "Purist," is encouraging. How interesting to learn that there may be mileage left in the Old Master yet.

Brett Weston: Voyage of the Eye

derives its value as a book from its emphasis upon Weston's output of the last 10 years (almost two thirds of the 75 pictures reproduced have been made since 1966, and a large proportion of the pre-1966 images are included as illustrations to Beaumont Newhall's afterword). The simplistic editing into geographical or geo-political sites ("The Desert," "Alaska") or such arbitrary categories as "Abstraction" and "Continuing Work" (and the sore-thumb inclusion of a "New York 1944-1945" section between "The Desert" and "California Beaches") will have to be overlooked by those who will want the only extant record of what promises to be the most revealing and significant direction — for himself, at least — of Weston's career.

— Charles Desmarais