

Arthur Tress: Finding Us In the Other
By James Rhem

When Arthur Tress stood amid the sumptuous retrospective of his career in the rooms of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in July of 2001, he had one question: "Where do I go from here?" At 60 Tress was not ready to end his career as one of America's most prolific and protean photographic artists, but he wasn't ready to settle into repeating himself either. "It happens to many photographers," says Tress, "you become successful for one period because maybe in your twenties and thirties you make a certain contribution to photo history and then you kind of settle into that." And, indeed, while he's produced a huge and varied body of work, prints from Tress's "Dream Collector" series done when he was in his thirties remain perhaps his most collected work along with his homo-erotic imagery and selections from one of his excursions into color photography and extended photo-narrative, *The Fish Tank Sonata*.

Tress describes himself as "polymorphous perverse" in style and motivation, always looking for the edge of expression and pushing it or transgressing at that edge just a bit. The last rooms of the Corcoran show contained what must have seemed to many viewers the end of the line in stylistic experimentation. There were "pop-ups," three-dimensional photo constructions and a group of images called "Faceted Fictions." These last Tress created by photographing book illustrations through a faceted glass and then hand coloring the photographs. "With this elaborate series of very crafted images, I really pushed what photography is normally thought of," Tress recalled in a recent conversation.

"So what do you do?" Tress continued. "You go two steps forward and one step back; so I took six steps backward. I began rereading, getting in touch with photographers that I admired in my youth like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and others. I began looking at their books again. So in my own photography I went back to simple documentary, just walking around and taking pictures." For Tress, known as a pioneer of "staged" photography in his "Dream Collector" and "Theater of Mind" series in the 1970s, this move was both a departure and a return. His first major work was also documentary made just "walking around" —Open

Space in the Inner City: Ecology and the Urban Environment—a series undertaken for the Sierra Club focused on finding remnants of nature in the built environment. Five thousand portfolios of that work were printed and distributed to public schools. It fulfilled its documentary mission, aided in many ways by Tress's darker surrealist sensibility.

Before Tress could get out the door on his new walking adventure, what he describes as a “funny event” happened: a heavy box of prints he was getting down from a high shelf fell on his head and gave him a slight concussion. Perhaps it was more than slight; he awoke that night with the room spinning and found himself taken by ambulance to the hospital. He developed a severe case of vertigo. Most vertigo lasts a day or perhaps a week; Tress's lasted a year and a half.

The falling box was the first of a small series of accidents that had significant impacts on Tress's new creative work. When he started photographing again, he began a series he calls “Spinners” created by rotating the camera lens around a central pivot during exposure. “I'd just twist my wrist,” he says. Spinners of children seem to catch them with a fresh visual energy not so much in a tableau from their dreams as in the visceral process of dreaming itself.

One day while making “Spinners,” Tress's lens shade got cock-eyed. He thought, looking at the vignetting in the ground glass of his Hasselblad, “this is interesting” and went on to make a series of octagonal photos. Later that led him to wonder what would happen if he turned the lens shade around backwards. He tried it and looking at the fully circular vignette, he began to imagine images of strange new planets. Focusing on different textured and patterned surfaces, he created a whole portfolio of these which Lodima has just published as a book. “I was just using what I found – a kind of ‘straight’ photography, not that that's in anyway superior to manipulated photography. It's just where my head has been the last few years,” Tress continued.

The vertigo, Tress says, created a little instability in his creativity and made him rely on intuition more than a program of intention. Somehow it also got him into geometric shapes, especially spiral shapes.,

While the actual vertigo was new to Tress, the appeal of disorientation and the quest for reorientation were old friends. After college, he traveled the world —Europe, Egypt, Mexico, India, Japan and Africa— photographing cultures and customs as a kind of folklorist and ethnographer. Indeed, he ended his world tour in Sweden working as photographer for the Stockholm Ethnographical Museum. And when Tress returned to the States in 1968, his first assignment took him to Appalachia to document the people and customs there. Each of these “foreign” worlds presented a disorienting aspect, a challenge to Tress's understanding and experience, a challenge he would work out photographically by embracing the “otherness” of the places and

peoples. He had, after all, long been in the process of embracing the otherness of his homosexuality, a process culminating in yet another body of published work, *Arthur Tress: Facing Up* (1980). "Growing up in the 1950s as a gay teenager and not really knowing what that was gave me a sort of a sense of being an existential outsider," he says.

In some ways Tress has been almost as prolific, varied, and creative in the six years since his big retrospective as in the 40 years it showcased. He's produced compelling work in at least ten new series in both black and white and color. In two of the most impressive, he's played to his strengths as an "existential outsider" making penetrating images of two very contemporary subcultures — the habitués of skateboard and paintball parks. Both these worlds contain the fears and excitements that have animated some of Tress's best work for years. "It's something reflective of my inner psyche or insecurities, I guess," he says. "I always seem to focus on this edgy darkness, and that's where the best Tress lies. I don't know why: it's my gift and my curse."

In the skateboard and paintball parks, the fears of death and injury are both real and imagined; the dreams of flying and conquest enjoyed equally though in miniature versions. But if thematic familiarity drew Tress to these worlds, it is perhaps his delight in engaging very different visual and technical problems that has helped make them newly vibrant. "Look, there's a great joy in photography," says Tress. "Most photographers, when they're happy is when they're trudging along with their camera photographing; it's the brightest part of their day."

Just as thematic streams in Tress's creative life flow together in these two series in transformed ways, so, too, do formal visual qualities: the disorientation of the current spinners series, a harking back to the drama of shadows which he once explored in a full-length narrative (*Shadows*, 1975). Yet nothing about the work seems old, rehashed Tress.

"An aspect of the skate parks and paintball series that I'm rather proud of," says Tress, "is that I became a sort of sports photographer to do them, and that was something that I'd never really done. I really got good at anticipating action and shooting at 500th of a second. With the Hasselblad it's not easy. By the time you focus and release the shutter the action may be over. The way I enjoyed learning these new skills as a challenge, I think that's part of me, the attraction to trying the new to see what's that's like. What I can do with that?"

Eventually the skateboard work became a kind of narrative of ritual self-initiation that will soon appear as a book — "Wheels on Waves."

Serendipity has guided Tress's artistic journey in the last several years, and while he's opened himself to aleatoric practices at times (as in the "spinners"), there's been nothing careless about how he's traveled these new pathways. Take "Pointers," another post-vertigo series that followed "Spinners" and the octagonal photos. Exposure to a lot of modernist,

European-style architecture around Palm Springs caught Tress's eye and led him back to reviewing Rodchenko <<http://masters-of-photography.com/R/rodchenko/rodchenko.html>> and Bauhaus imagery. Faced with the challenge of photographing these stairways and facades in a fresh way, he turned the camera 45 degrees and stood his square image on its point. There was a touch of Mondrian influence hovering over the form as well, since Mondrian had done some diamond-shaped paintings with his usual geometric content. But Tress didn't stop there: "It was a way working that I'd never explored," says Tress. "Over the last five or six years I've thought of myself as a kind of student, recharging my batteries for the next 25 years," he says laughing. "When I was doing the "Pointers," I even went to Europe to photograph some of the masterpieces of modernist architecture: Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and others. I just made a little pilgrimage."

About the "Pointers" Tress says, "I set out first to destroy the frame, the traditional frame of the photograph. I've made myself a little rule for the last few years that I'm not allowed to make the same photograph twice. I think a lot of photographers get one or two interesting photographs and then do that for the next five years. So I'll do three or four of something, and then I'll say to myself, 'Have I done that already?' In photography it's very easy to get into visual formulas, and I think a lot of photographers fall prey to that. It's the way you structure reality. You just get in the habit of organizing things again and again the same way."

Though the modernist subject matter in the "Pointers" seems familiar, Tress's images convey a fresh energy, one that not only satisfies in the here and now, but also one that renews one's sense of what was fresh and vital in all that Bauhaus imagery and modernist design in the first place. Influences abound in Tress's work. He readily acknowledges them, knowing that to be influenced is not to be derivative. "A big influence on me in the last few years has been Paul Strand," he says. "A couple of his books are laid out on my table right now." Though Strand did all kinds of work, his portraits have perhaps impacted Tress most, and have led to yet another impressive series in the last few years called "Grave Demeanors." A number of these picture gay men with their mothers. One astonishing portrait of Tress's sister makes the idea of family connection almost literally palpable.

All of Tress's recent work has been formally well-structured; something that he believes may be a professional disadvantage for an artist these days. Thinking especially of his "Pointers," Tress muses: "One of the tenets of modernism is movement of forms within the picture and the tension of positive and negative shapes and the edges of the picture, but now with the adoration of the snapshot aesthetic that attention to form has been neglected a little bit—the ability within that instant to be able to construct a very complicated orchestration of shapes and forms. I think we've

dumbed down what we expect from photography. And sadly, I think a lot of curators have followed that lead.”

Though Tress has continually renewed himself creatively and produced an impressive body of varied work, he remains untroubled by the thought that clear, careful structure is passé. For him, a photograph could hardly aspire to the status of art without it, and, in that way, he remains unabashedly old-fashioned even as he goes forward never really repeating himself.

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