

PHMD 560 – Special Topics: View Camera, Fall 2012
Writing Prompt No. 4

Has your time with a view camera affected your view of the early practitioners of the photographic medium? How so? Has knowing, first hand, how other photographers make photographs (contemporary and otherwise) changed the way you view their photographs? i.e. Sally Mann, Richard Avedon, Alec Soth, Shelby Lee Adams and other large-format shooters. How so?

“Prior to using the view camera I had idolized the attention to detail and very tight/straight compositions to those who utilized large format and tried to emulate that same aesthetic in my digital shots. I could achieve nearly everything but that amazing “tack-sharpness.” Like most things, you can never really appreciate something until you experience it first hand. I looked at numerous view camera shots and even watched youtube videos of those like Alec Soth who demoed the use of an 8x10, but I never fully comprehended and appreciated what it took to use a camera like this until I took this class. The process itself of taking a photo is now more peaceful and has slowed me down immensely. What used to be 20+ shots in 30 minutes is now 1 or 2 in 30.”

“Well, Sally Mann has been my hero since I first got into photography. She is one of the main reasons I wanted to be in the view camera class and her work has inspired me to grow in my ability to use the camera. After taking the class, I now understand much more fully what goes into making a successful photo with a view camera. I learned how much time it takes and the long process that must be done in order to have one printed photo.”

“I'd say that my time with the view camera has definitely affected the way I viewed early practitioners of large format photography. It puts their work into a relative perspective; I've always appreciated the early practitioner's photographs, but dealing first hand with large format photography, you get a new sense of how they were producing work. It also makes you contemplate how their work may appear differently, not that it's bad, but if they had the opportunity to use better film & lenses how those photographs would appear today. I'd definitely say viewing/knowing how a photographer creates photographs definitely affects the way you view the photographs. I think through the usage of large format cameras, one must be more patient or understanding of a situation. It requires the photographer to interact very differently with subjects and surroundings. I'd say this is very relevant in Richard Mosse's *Infra*, *Breach*, and *Nomads* series. If you were not familiar with large format photography, and you viewed Mosse's images of war within the series I believe you would have a completely different view point/or less appreciation. I'm not saying that if these were taken with a digital or 35mm they wouldn't be good photographs, but understanding the photographic process & qualities of a large format camera and seeing it used in war scenarios, is truly remarkable. I think knowing the process, skills required, and patience definitely changes the way we view the photographic process. It doesn't necessarily mean I appreciate large format more so than digital, because they all require certain skills, but I rather appreciate large format photography when the process is applied to projects that exemplify the qualities found within the process, and adds to the quality of the images.”

“My time working with the view camera has definitely affected my view of the early practitioners of the photographic medium. I have a lot of respect for the time and thought that they put into each image. After working with a view camera, I know that almost no shot can be entirely spontaneous. Some photographers, like Sally Mann, do an incredible job of making a photograph taken with a view camera look spontaneous and her work does not appear staged in the slightest. I think that this kind of photo is

especially difficult to capture with a view camera, which I did not grasp before I had the opportunity to work with one. I also understand better why contemporary photographers would choose to stick with a medium that could seem "out-dated" or not technologically advanced to some. Even though it may take longer and be a hassle to carry around, the detail and control that is given by using a view camera is unmatched. I think that by working with a view camera, I appreciate the beauty of well-made view camera photographs even more. I definitely hope I get a chance to continue working in this medium."

"I think that while using the view camera I have truly realized why some photographers today would still go through all of the effort of using this type of medium to capture photographs. After using a view camera, and seeing all of the effort that it takes into making one good print, I truly have a new love for the photographs of other photographers simply because I realize all the effort that went into the picture. When you look at a picture, you don't usually think about what kind of camera it was taken with. Now days, people automatically assume that it was taken with some sort of digital camera. When you learn that the picture was taken with a view camera it makes you think as a photographer what they had to do for simple things, like lighting, or how long the exposure was, or how long it took them to drag their camera all the way out there.

Today there are many other "easier" ways of making a photograph, but it's the photographers that we have discussed in class that truly inspire me as a photographer. Watching the Sally Mann video really changed the way that I think about using a view camera because a lot of her subjects were here children, which could be a very tough subject to make stand still. While also watching the Alec Soth documentary opened my eyes to taking photographs as a whole, because instead of having someone tell you what to photograph, he simply photographed all over the country what he thought was interesting to himself. He loved doing it, and he continued which worked very well for him.

Over all, I think that by actually using a view camera it gives me a new appreciation for photographers that use this type of medium to capture photographs because you realize how much work it actually takes into getting that one good shot. The same photograph taken with a digital picture may not be as intriguing simply because you know that they may have simply looked into the back of their camera and adjusted every picture to get that "good" shot."

"After learning how to use a view camera, I have a much greater understanding of how well-known view camera photographers create their images. Before this class I was often confused about how they created certain effects and captured such detail. I also better understand their choices of subject matter. Because of the view camera's large size and typically longer exposure times, the photographer's choices of landscape and posed portraits made more sense to me. Knowing this also makes me more appreciative of the difficulties Sally Mann overcame to create her seemingly spontaneous portraits of her children."

"I have always had a tremendous respect for early photo-practitioners, especially those who utilized early unwieldy cameras in the field like Timothy O'Sullivan. My experience with the view camera has only heightened this respect. I am only just beginning to get to the point where I can perform the rituals of the view camera and comfortably produce images without dedicating the majority of my thought process to remembering the steps. O'Sullivan, and contemporary artist Sally Mann, added to this arduous process by utilizing collodian wet plates. Watching the documentary about Sally Mann in class and thinking about the constraints of adding a time-sensitive medium to the view camera process has put me in awe of photographers who opt for hand-prepared large-format collodian. After my experiences in this class, I view View Camera images less as simple images and more as carefully crafted art objects."

“Working with a view camera has absolutely changed the way I look at photographs. Looking at an image and learning that it is made with a view camera makes me have so much more respect for the maker. I now know how much effort goes into making these images. Nothing can be written off as “right place, right time.” If you want something to look spontaneous, it takes a lot of staging. That’s a really interesting and frustrating thing to have to deal with when you make an image. Sally Mann’s work especially blows me away knowing what a long process it took to create such effortless looking images. I don’t think enough credit is given to her children who had to be incredibly still. Without their patience, her work wouldn’t be possible. You definitely “make” and not “take” view camera photographs.”

“After working with the view camera and the difficulties making photographs in remote locations I can only image how problematic it must have been for photographers like Edward Weston working in the desert using glass plate negatives. I’ve always had respect for older photographic works and their makers because the processes were much more tedious and results weren’t always certain. At the same time, I believe some of the images made by well known photographers were simply ‘lucky’ given that photography equipment and film wasn’t so tested and accurate then. Today I think I examine the photos more closely, now that I know the photo taking process behind Alec Soth or Sally Mann’s photos. In the past I thought their photos were incredible because of the sharpness and the composition. Now I know it’s the camera that helps them do this and their photos are interesting because of the content.”

“Knowing that many of the older photos were staged both changes and doesn’t change my view. I get the feeling that the photos are less candid but the meanings of the photos are the same. A photographer should not play it off as being genuine in the sense that was what really happened. I work for a newspaper and so my take on what is considered ethical might be different than a photographer like Alec Soth.”

“Through seeing the work of other view camera photographers, I definitely have more knowledge of how they made photographs and even though the photographs may seem like snapshots, they are actually really posed. I really enjoyed the documentary on Sally Mann. Her images are so interesting and the way she photographs them is inspiring. It made me photograph differently when I use a view camera. Since none of my images from class have turned out very well, seeing Sally Mann’s photographs made me realize that some amazing images CAN be made from the view camera and it doesn’t have to be this ridiculously large, challenging camera to use.”

“Going into view camera class I had a general idea that it took quite some time to produce just one image by early practitioners of photography but I now realize how much of an importance an image was. My time with a view camera has made me realize that there was so much intent and importance put into creating one image back then. I definitely have more respect for early photographers who didn’t have the technology advancements we have available to us now. Although large format photography is an older process, we still have many technological advances that weren’t available 100 years ago. Looking at artists who still use large format photography today, I always think about what their process was like to create their images.”

“Learning how the view camera works has made me appreciate how difficult it was for those photographers to achieve each shot while maintaining an air of spontaneity. It also gives me the impression that these resulting photographs take an immense amount of time, not only for setting up each shot, but also for the likelihood of shooting multiple images. Knowing the process of these photographers, or virtually any photographer for that matter, makes me study their images more in-

depth, to try to discover how they can create such honest moments that really take so much time to make.”

“It just takes so LONG to take a photo and you only have two chances per negative holder. That's very frustrating. I don't know how the early photographers did it! People would have to sit and NOT MOVE for a short or long period of time. How do you get children to do this?! Perhaps children were not as hyper and had more patience than children today. It's a calming feeling though, taking the pictures. You are not in a hurry, and if you are, you will end up shooting again.

I guess I see that there are photographers who choose the view camera over a regular film camera or a digital for several reasons. I think it's a personal choice. I still prefer my digital camera. But I do like that there is detail in the negatives that you might not get with a digital camera.”

“I had a pretty good idea to the trials that early photographers faced thanks to art history courses here at KU. However, I do think I have a better appreciation for the photographers using large format cameras, in particular the ones trekking up mountains and down valleys with these heavy cameras. It really shows just how dedicated these artist were to the medium and why they should be respected, even if you don't love there images, they were pioneers of a sort I really cant even fathom trying to use glass plates to take pictures, it would still be very difficult even with the use of cars instead of donkeys and mules.”

“Absolutely. It gives me great insight into the process by which they create photographs and you can really see that kind of aesthetic when going back and viewing their work. You can see the care and framing in their work and I believe that I can appreciate it more having used a view camera myself.”

“I had read quite a bit about the trials and tribulations of the early practitioners before handling a view camera myself, so I wouldn't say it has affected my view.

“In a world where there are 500,000 pictures a second being uploaded onto Facebook, what does it mean to be a photographer in that environment?” - Alec Soth

It is important to understand the medium involved in creating work, but also to know how the photographer views their photographs as a whole.”

“I recently checked out the art library's copy of The American West since I had heard so much about it but had never actually seen any of the work. What I realized was if I had seen these images maybe a year or two ago, I would have seen they had conceptual merit but I would not have considered the skill it would have taken to execute those photographs.

The same goes for Shelby Lee Adams. After viewing part of the film in class, I wanted to see how it ended so I got a hold of a copy and started from the beginning all over again. I think what I appreciated the most about his work was his influence of classical themes, that he borrowed from the antiquity, especially in his composition which I NOW know would have definitely involved some scheimpflug. I guess in the end, I'm just more appreciative of their craft.”