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EUDORA WELTY

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A Word on the Photographs

THE LUCKY SNAPSHOT has not been accidental, even though an amateur has made it. His own eye has seen first, has chosen, what the eye of the camera is to take in, and directed the instant for the film to register it. The photographer learns the possibilities of his tool—what depth or intensity of focus will reward him, what advantage can be taken of light and shadow—but beyond this, it is essential for him to be sensitive to the speed, not simply of the camera's shutter, but of the moment in time.

Among all living creatures, only human beings seem to have the knowledge that the moment is passing, and the acute wish to hold that moment. In the most unpretentious snapshot lies the wish to clasp fleeting life. Framing a few square inches of space for the fraction of a second, the photographer may capture—rescue from oblivion—fellow human beings caught in the act of living. He is devoted to the human quality of transience. Here lies whatever value his picture-taking has.

So no photograph is without its subjective implications; the eye of the camera is recording what the eye of the photographer is discovering. In the eye of the beholder arrested by pleasure or recognition, the photograph becomes subjective too; it speaks in its way of the joys and sorrows, the humiliations and the pride, of the human predicament.

By recording what passes, the photographer offers the illusion of not letting it go. These pictures represent such efforts. They are among hundreds made by me in the late 1930s and early '40s in the State of Mississippi. If a value persists in them, it is because life, whatever it meant, had to mean, in those poor times, speaks for itself in the unchanging language of movement and gesture, and looks undefeatedly back at the camera's eye.

Eudora Welty

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