

(At the end of the text are listed a series of links to the pertinent parts of the website.)

Panoramic Assemblages by Allen Schill

– This work developed out of a wish to include a great deal more in a photograph than can be done in just one frame, out of a wish to represent more of the totality of a place and time, to suggest what it was like to be there, to say something about the nature of place. It is an essentially poetic enterprise. I think of it sometimes as a sort of Zen documentary, in which pictorial aims are combined with the impulse to record a certain vision of our world, of our life. I've made panoramic assemblages of a wide variety of places – in the city, in the pristine wilderness, and all the places in between.

– It started, however, practically by chance: while teaching photography in a high school in 1979, in order to develop a possible assignment for my classes, I recycled an old idea, often used in the 19th century to map comprehensively an entire landscape. Taking my own bait, I became fascinated with the possibilities, and for several years (ca. 1979-85) it was one of the main kinds of photography with which I was involved. I do it much less now, being more involved with the view camera, but whenever I go to an unfamiliar or unusual place or on vacation, I make a number of panoramic works.

– While their subjects or settings often tend toward the pastoral or the idyllic, with the strong, even overwhelming presence of nature, I do not hesitate to include the human presence – even where there are no people, there are at least the signs of their presence within the natural world – the things we build, the traces we leave upon the landscape, the paths we walk. (I think of the Chinese landscapes where we see mountains that take our breath away, and in a corner somewhere, barely noticeable, a solitary fisherman, or a meditating monk.) Much of my non-panoramic photography as well has been oriented towards the dynamic interplay between man and nature.

– In these assemblages there is also more than a trace, I hope, of a human mentality – but in the photographs themselves, rather than in the things represented – something that testifies to the organizing principle in human perception. There is the artistic imperative first to see with deep human feeling, and then to create an image that will suggest that inner experience to the viewer. There is the need to find order within the chaos. The formal objective is to achieve a composition that works as a whole, and in which each separate frame has its own interest and holds up on its own in the composition. No picture is worth much, however, if there are only formal considerations. It lacks feelings, ideas, a soul. The true objective is to create something that expresses both the spirit of the place and the spirit of the photographer.

– It's not for nothing that I think of that meditating monk. For me an important influence has been the Chinese and Japanese traditions of panoramic landscape paintings, whether continuous (which are either made to be displayed fully opened, or in the form of scrolls, to be "scrolled" from one end to the other, revealing only one part at a time for examination), or designed as a series of panels, their borders punctuating the composition. Either way, the format obliges the eye to focus on the work a section at a time, to "travel" throughout the composition, and to savor the many details that pass unnoticed in the quick glance or the overall view. The picture contains (or at least implies) a whole world, compressed into a small space, to be appreciated like a jewel.

– On a more personal level, another influence has been bicycling. I have been an avid

cyclist practically all my life. Besides the physical thrill and the exhilaration of being propelled through space, there is the forceful wide-angle perspective, the heightened visual sensation of being exposed all around, and the expanded awareness of peripheral vision. Forms advance and recede, curving through one's visual field. The panoramas themselves suggest a like dynamism with their strong horizontal sweep, the flow of forms from one frame to another, and the constant adjustment of perspective, mediated by their formal push-pull and punctuated by the divisions between frames. Even if it is evident that the photographer was stationary, the panoramas are full of movement.

– The question may be asked why make a panoramic image multi-frame, when there are cameras specially made to take in, for a single image, up to and over 360° laterally. The answer lies in the additional challenge and the unique possibilities of composing a multi-paneled image. One frame overlaps another slightly, or the horizon – if there is one – may rise or fall from one frame to the next. For the most part I stay in one place for each piece, moving only slightly, but occasionally (for example, when photographing interiors) I change my position drastically from one frame to the next, resulting in a more disjointed composition. Usually I avoid highly regular mappings of a subject in order to let the eye guide me in composing each successive frame, adjusting the extent of lateral overlap by instinct.

– The procedure is simple, and requires only patience, judgement, and basic technique (like most good photography). When I find a suitable scene, interior or exterior, I frame each portion of the picture tentatively in the viewfinder, usually with a slight overlap between one frame and the next. I may adjust my position, and study again, trying different angles of view and different ways of composing the separate frames. Naturally I decide whether to use a horizontal or a vertical format for the separate frames. In most cases, the angle of inclination of the lens is kept fairly constant, and the image framed at a near-perfect horizontal or vertical, to achieve an orderly “flow” in the result. At times, however, the framing of the sections is deliberately irregular, with odd angles and oblique compositions, with a quite different effect in mind. (I have practically never used a tripod for this work; it seems to me important that the eye decide the image, not a mechanical or arbitrary system.)

– After due consideration, the panorama is photographed in succession, using a uniform exposure that is a good compromise for the entire scene (this is crucial, or they will be impossible to print uniformly). Generally I use negative film, black and white or color (although I've used transparency film a few times), and typically a wide-angle lens, which offers a strong sense of depth and space, as well an encompassing view. The usual minimum number of images for a panorama is three horizontal frames up to six or seven, or up to nine or ten vertical frames. Then the film is developed.

– In the printing phase, another uniform exposure is determined by testing and is then used for each frame, manipulating local areas as needed. I like to print with some black around each frame to emphasize the frame divisions. All sheets of paper are developed at the same time to ensure uniformity. For processing, I use a specially made rack, with space for up to 18 sheets of enlarging paper held vertically, and a series of deep tanks.

– The final prints are trimmed to black and then mounted together with their siblings. In the case of producing files for digital printing, or for printing posters in tritone and quadtone offset, high-quality scans are produced of the negatives, which are then assembled by computer and manipulated as much as desired – in fact with far more

control than is possible in the darkroom – to bring out the best in the image.

– Commercially developed and printed photos may work well if well-printed, though they are slightly cropped and don't give you the black edge. Most often, however, the automatic exposure mechanism of the printing machines adjusts the exposure of every frame for average density and overall color as if each were a separate, independent photograph, and not part of a group, thus giving an irregular result. (Flatter, more uniform subjects have a better chance of success in automatic printing than contrasty or irregular subjects.) On the other hand, mechanical lab processing of film, as opposed to mass-market printing, offers much to be desired in its uniformity. This saves grief for the photographer when printing: the common slight overdevelopment near the edges of roll film (the long dimension of the format) is no big problem when printing a single image – a little burning here and there and you have a decent print. But it's a nightmare to expose six, eight, or more successive images uniformly if you have to burn each one the same way.

- This whole discussion, it should be obvious, relates to pre-digital photography. Modern digital cameras, even most of those untended for casual photography, can make panoramic images. The simplest merely crop the usual format to a long rectangle (which really gives us nothing new or even very panoramic in terms of the angle covered). The better ones make a series of exposures which can then be assembled in the camera itself, or in the computer with Photoshop or the digital photo editing and management programs made for a given camera. The results are impressive, at least considering the technical feat of the software. I have played a bit trying to find the possibilities of this "stitching", especially that of creating a sort of distorted, cubistic collage by working against the program. But I still lament the fact that we rely on so completely these days on this sort of automatic, anyone-can-do-it technology. I remember a photographer-friend (Melvin Dennis, whom I got to know through the Puchong Gallery in New York), who remarked (when amateur panoramic cameras enjoyed a brief vogue), "It's impossible to take a bad panoramic photograph." He was implying that the inherent danger of the genre is banality. With this in mind I would repeat that the multi-framed panorama is far more interesting because it is more challenging to make.

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Links to panoramic assemblages on the site:

Backyard & Suburban:	http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S3a
Parks:	http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S3b
Rural:	http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S3c
Urban and Interiors:	http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S3d
Italy and Ireland:	http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S3e