

Little Things: Pinhole Camera Photographs by Allen Schill

Pinhole Camera Photographs: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S2a>

– These photographs were made with a “PinZip 126” pinhole camera which I obtained by mail order for about twelve dollars. It is made of cardboard about as thick as that of a box of breakfast cereal. In lieu of a lens there is a sheet of thin brass with a tiny hole drilled in it, figured by the makers of the camera to be equal to a lens opening of $f/110$. Exposures range from a few seconds in open daylight to half an hour for some interiors, and were calculated with a hand-held light meter, always compensating for reciprocity failure. For most of these pictures, taken by the indirect light of a north window, they ranged from two to four minutes. The use of 126 roll film, Kodak’s old Instamatic cassette format, frees one of the inconvenience of most pinhole cameras, which only hold one sheet of film at a time. The camera is secured tightly to a tripod with two heavy-duty rubber bands. Its perspective is rather wide, roughly equivalent to a 24mm or 28mm lens on a 35mm camera. There is no viewfinder, so composing is a matter of good aim and experience.

– All this bears upon the subjects chosen and the results obtained. A pinhole provides a softer focus than a good lens (or even a cheap one), but compensates for this (if soft focus is considered a flaw in itself) by offering infinite depth of field. Unlike a camera with a lens, a pinhole camera will focus simultaneously and equally well on objects at any distance. Aside from photographs that combine the very near and the very far, this lends itself well to extreme close-ups of tiny objects. By adapting to a situation so different from the customary, the photographer is brought around to a novel way of thinking and seeing. I have had the same experience working with other unconventional cameras – I have had to learn to see somehow as the camera sees.

– For me there is something special about getting so close to such small things – closer, sometimes, than one’s own eyes could focus – that may be a bit like actually becoming very small, like the proverbial fly on the wall, or like seeing everything from a disembodied, free-floating perspective, as in a near-death experience. I am also reminded of the Aleph (through the story of that name by Jorge Luis Borges) which, according to Kabbalist tradition, is a special point in space through which one can see, at once, the whole of creation, past, present, and future – a sort of ultimate observatory, and a notion that fascinates me.

– As ponderous as this may seem, the making of these photographs is yet a form of play for me. I see them as variously whimsical, symbolic, dreamlike, or macabre; in any case, meant to be enjoyed.

Toy Camera Photographs by Allen Schill

Toy Camera Photographs: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S2b>

– These photographs, dating mostly from 1994-95, were made with a child’s toy camera with a cheap plastic lens. The camera uses 120 roll film, and leaves an image sharper towards the center, and darker and more softly-focused in the

extremities. The borders of the image are slightly arched and a bit ragged, due to the crude way the camera is made. Focusing scarcely exists, and there is no control over the shutter speed. To photograph indoors is hardly possible without flash (whose quality of illumination I have never liked) or unusually bright ambient light. Thus it lends itself to photographs made outdoors.

– They are similar in general aspect to the pinhole photographs. Although the toy camera photos are medium and long shots, and the pinhole camera photos are usually close-ups, both share a roughly square format, and have one sort or another of soft focus. The compositions, in both bodies of work, tend to be characterized by diagonality and an emphasis on the dispositions of objects in space.

– They are also related in feeling or spirit. In their roughness they have some of the fleeting, indistinct quality of images that we remember vaguely-but-vividly from years ago, like old family snapshots, even of unknown people and places. More importantly for the artist, the feeling of being from another time shifts easily into the feeling that they are somehow out of time.

– Their subjects present themselves in a way that, on some reflection, begins to suggest something about the point of view of the photographer, that mute, invisible presence that one can sense here perhaps more than in other photographs. In these images I feel my own senses reflected. In a similar way, in some sort of transference, the image throws the viewer back on himself. There are few if any people to be seen; the locations are out-of-the-way or remote, abandoned places perfect for lonely contemplation. There is the viewpoint of a solitary person, one that focuses on one thing, or on a combination of elements meant to be seen as a whole.

– Certain of these toy camera images will remind viewers of the work of the Pictorialist Movement in photography, with its typically romantic, aesthetic, even sentimental vision of (photographed) reality. (I say this even though it is not fair to typify Pictorialism in this way.) Others display an angularity and strong chiaroscuro not unlike the bold, psychologically provocative forms of expressionist photography.

– I would not like to exclude anything from the range of possible responses to these photographs; viewed as a whole they run a broad gamut. Some of them can elicit highly diverse responses depending on the circumstances. But for me, the feeling or viewpoint of these images is rather like the attitude of Zen: the thing seen, whether in real life or on the wall or on the page, is only a catapult, hopefully, to another (inner) realization. Perhaps they are trying to be photographs of the inner eye as much as of the ostensible subjects themselves.

Allen Schill

© 2010 Allen Schill. All rights reserved in all countries. No part of this document may be reproduced or used in any form without prior written permission from the author.