

American Rockies: Photographs by Gus Foster

A TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK: RECONSTRUCTING FEELINGS by James L. Enyeart

A lifetime of travel places Gus Foster in a succession of artists who have gained insight and inspiration from the exotic and unfamiliar. In the nineteenth century the designation "traveler" was reserved for either the idle rich, explorers, or social anarchists such as gypsies, artists, and entertainers. The shared goals of seeking knowledge, expanding opportunity, learning new skills, satisfying curiosity, and most importantly, digging a deeper well of emotional experiences that would mold, explain, and define their personal selves, bonded this unlikely group of travelers. The invention of photography, in the middle of the century, brought the world to everyone's doorstep, virtually overnight, and also helped stimulate a desire on many people's part to experience foreign lands and cultures first hand. Photography fueled a new industry in the form of tourism. As transportation simultaneously improved, shortening time and lessening the difficulty required to cover great distances, the concept of being a traveler in the original sense began to lose its distinction of privilege or eccentricity. Traveling because it was possible, rather than as a personal obsession, changed the very nature of travel itself.

Today, people travel regularly to their destinations of choice regardless of distance. Travel itself has created a new vocabulary -- commuting, tourism, vacations, and visits. "Visiting" a foreign country for some is an experience similar to visiting Disneyland. Travelers rush to acquire impressions of the unusual and the dramatic; these impressions enhance their sense of worldliness and add to their accumulation of new places, events, and sights, the "rewards" of travel. These modern-day travelers might have become travel minded, but are not, for the most part, travelers with an interest in the same philosophical and subjective qualities as the nineteenth-century irrefutable traveler who sought an expanded vision of self.

The exceptions, here at the end of the twentieth century, are artists such as Gus Foster who express the original traveler's commitment to exploring the potential of new places. These artists reveal a deeper sense of self-awareness, and share their insights in the artistic work they produce. As travelers -- and the list includes many of the world's image makers -- such artists extend the nature of personal experience into the realm of aesthetic experience. The hardship and sacrifice that inevitably accompany the production of works of art, knows no bounds, but creating art satisfies personal obsession and also gives something of value to the public. Ironically, an artist's selfishness of purpose hides a selflessness that binds art to the public.

Gus Foster first manifested this traveler's motive as artist in 1972. While driving around California he photographed through his car window, using his camera as a notebook, a record of where he

had been. It was for him, as he recently described to me, "a process which lent itself to self-examination and a means of reconstructing the feelings and experiences of my travels." This experience, photographing through the moving car's window, greatly influenced his later use of panoramic cameras and his exploration of the panoramic technology's inherent philosophic characteristic, time itself.

In 1975 Foster experimented with making films through the moving car's window, films that did not require editing. These films combined the still image as a notebook concept with the moving image's ability to add a sense of time. With these experimental films he discovered his love for the comprehensive, complex element of time intrinsic to photography. An element that was made even more apparent by the moving image of 16mm film, and later rediscovered by him in the nature of the panorama photograph. Foster recalls what he felt while making one of his films: "I would drive sixty miles in sixty minutes and make one continuous shot -- something in that experience of viewing the world through a car window evoked in me a meditative feeling. One such film was titled Death Valley Sunrise. This film began in the hour of predawn blackness, proceeded through twilight over a mountainous ridge on the horizon to the east, to the completion of sunrise -- all the while recording the sound of the moving car."

During this time Foster purchased his first panoramic camera, at the suggestion of a friend. He has since then acquired more and more sophisticated equipment, cameras that can produce negatives of continuous exposure as the camera lens rotates 360 degrees or more. Foster believes that his car window experiments led him to an awareness of the potential of the panoramic photograph and also led him to adopt it as his medium of choice.

Foster and many other photographers are quick to discuss and acclaim the merits of their equipment; they acknowledge the rigorous requirements for making images in especially difficult situations, such as Foster's scaling of mountain peaks. But this essay concentrates on the images, rather than on equipment, process, and technology, with the intent of imparting a deeper understanding of the photographs as idea. All too often visual content in photography is obscured by a fascination with its technology. I do not discount the importance of mastering the uncooperative mechanics of panoramic cameras. But once the vision is in place, an artist's choice of materials and technique are but the price of admission for aesthetic discovery. We may admire the craftsmanship behind process, but we are not confronted with it in our role as viewers. What we see in the final work requires more than admiration. Works of art demand of viewers understanding, empathy, and a willingness to be emotionally and intellectually guided by the artist's ability to reconstruct feelings.

A 1991 project of Foster's revealed the depth of his traveler's approach to making photographs, and disclosed the sophistication he brought to making panoramic images. Inspired by the early-nineteenth-century wood-block prints of the Tokaido Road by Ando Hiroshige, Foster retraced the route of the fifty-three stations, described by the artist, that dotted the landscape between Tokyo and Kyoto from the eighth century on. He saw in Hiroshige another traveler who memorialized fleeting emotional responses to the beauty of a linear, panoramic landscape (the 300-mile length of the Tokaido Road), and who also used travel to reveal the elements of his aesthetic desire. In a 1993 artist's statement Foster wrote of the parallels between his scroll-like photographs and the westernized realism in Hiroshige prints: "People are as fascinated by kite flying today as they were then, the rain that fell on paper parasols then, falls on today's umbrellas, people that gathered at the shrines for festivals then, attend the same rites today. Now the memento is a group photograph at the Temple gates. The monumental work made by an artist 160 years ago still speaks today; it was his effort and the panoramic account of life in his time that led to my own journey and an account by a traveler in the late twentieth century."

Foster left Los Angeles in 1975 to move to Taos, New Mexico, where he and the artist Larry Bell bought a studio together. When Foster reflects on the artists he admires, like Hiroshige, who have had some ambient effect on his visual thinking, he includes Larry Bell, Robert Rauschenberg, and Edward Ruscha for their command of their materials and ideas. He also includes photographers Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, who for him represent time, time as life itself, where the appearance of reality is defined by photography.

In Taos Foster narrowed his interests to the panoramic photograph and began exploring its inherent potential for rendering elements of time, leaving tracings of circumstances in which time past and time present were simultaneously represented at the beginning and the end of an image. Shadows of people and objects revealed the passage of time in an otherwise still and contemplative tableau. He liked the elements of the panoramic process that paralleled his earlier films. A ten-inch-wide roll of film, six feet long, made a negative of a 360 degree panorama, which was comparable to filming a continuous image for sixty minutes at sixty miles per hour. Foster saw and felt a 360 degree turn of time. In the space of its rotation, events and positions of objects had changed and time had its own way with the world and with the making of an image.

In his photographs, Foster's interest in the unpredictable evidence of time's many faces is held in a kind of aesthetic suspension. He combines the variable that he cannot control, time, with his highly visual instinct for pleasurable images. His personal feelings, his reactions to the reality of the moment, imbue the subject matter of his photographs. For the viewer Foster's photographs are silent testaments to the commingling of the eternal nature of time and the very temporal

nature of our observation over which it has dominion. Foster reconstructs feelings that merge from the intellect and the emotions simultaneously in stasis. The result is the Zen-like beauty of Foster's panoramas, a beauty that engulfs viewers without explanation, in ways different from most other panoramic images by photographers who focus only on the uniqueness of the technology.

Once in New Mexico, Foster turned into an outdoor person with yet another obsession to embrace, hiking in wilderness country. As he explains it, he became totally immersed in the outdoors not because it was there, but because it was everywhere. He was already a student of the work of photographers who preceded him in the artistic pleasures of the majestic and primordial Southwest landscape, William Henry Jackson and Timothy Henry O'Sullivan among them. He felt the lure of the mountains, just as they had, because hidden among the snow-capped peaks were visions and vistas not yet seen by the human eye.

Between 1978 and 1981 Foster's approach to selecting and photographing various mountain peaks in the Pecos from both their bases and summits reflected no particular pattern. He made his choices randomly according to where he thought he would like to test himself and his equipment, where the reward might be especially pleasing. Then in 1982 a friend invited him to join him in a hike to the summit of Handies Peak in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. This 14,000 foot peak turned out to be an oracle of sorts for him. It was, as he told me, "like looking at infinity from all points on the compass -- all the world became a single emotion." In these words Foster veritably describes his panoramic photographs of the Rocky Mountain Range from Canada to Mexico. After Handies Peak, Foster returned to the Pecos Wilderness in New Mexico where he became addicted to "the image," that is, making panoramas that could recreate his epiphanous experience at Handies Peak. A pattern to his choices of images began to emerge as he obsessively set out to climb most of the peaks of the Pecos Wilderness. So, while in his early forties, Foster finally found in nature an experience that exactly matched his intuition for what the panoramic image should contain. For him, the mountain peaks became a single emotion and the elements of time and observation became a single image.

The extraordinary nineteenth-century photographers Vittorio Sella, Samuel Bourne, and the Bisson Frères, set the standard for making large format photographs in the mountains of Europe and India; but it is not their legacy that can be called upon when trying to find comparable images to Foster's, or a comparable passion for photographing at the summit. Certainly, the difficulty quotient is present in these nineteenth-century pioneers' works considering they prepared and made large glass plate negatives in the field. And their keen eyes and aesthetic choices are faultless. But their drummers are too distant and the look of their images too restrained. It is,

rather, from the work of a twentieth-century photographer, scientist, mountaineer, artist, and traveler that an artistic endeavor relative to the Rocky Mountain images of Foster is found.

mt huntington, alaska Bradford Washburn, who by age twenty-seven in 1937 was the preeminent mountaineer and photographer of the Alaska Range, also became this country's leading aerial photographer of Mt. Everest in the Himalayas and Alaska's Mt. McKinley. His aerial photographs of mountain ranges from the Alps to New Hampshire's Presidential Range remain the very maps used by climbers to make ascents and plan climbing routes the world over. Washburn, now eighty-eight years old, continued actively photographing and mapping the world's highest peaks well into his seventies. His achievements are legend in the scientific world. His photographs, however, were about more than the exacting science and perfectionism required to produce large format images from the air.

The Museum of Modern Art, the George Eastman House, and the Center for Creative Photography, among many other museums, have included his photographs in their collections and exhibitions for decades. His work, a forerunner to Foster's, is about the joy and love of high places and about sharing the drama of those singular moments where time is suspended. He, like Foster, has been a traveler in the original sense for over half a century, letting no mountain peak of respectable challenge escape his eye or his passion for creating a work of art that does justice to the experience of having been there.

Washburn's and Foster's lives share similarities other than their commitment to photographing mountain ranges. Washburn chose to refine large format aerial photography while Foster chose the grand panoramic format. Both photographers pushed their tools beyond the expected range of possibility. Both photographers' backgrounds include museum experience. Washburn was Director of the Boston Museum of Science for most of his career (and holds the title of Honorary Director to this day), and Foster was Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts early in his. Their scholarly and educational experiences deepened their understanding of the merits of research and planning in the execution of their photography, helping to lessen the advent of failure and the potential of a fatal accident.

The value of identifying Washburn's work as a significant prototype to Foster's imagery lies in the fact that every good idea needs to be continuously reinvented or it dies. It matters little that these two photographers do not know the work of the other. It matters greatly that the world knows that they exist and have taken very different but related paths to unimaginable parts of the world.

Foster refers to himself today as the adopted son of the Rockies and admits that the Rockies are all he needs the rest of his life. At age fifty-eight he will not be climbing Mt. McKinley, but the Rocky Mountain Range remains in reach and has become his metaphor for the panoramic image. Foster describes the Continental Divide as the place where he walks along the spine of the United States. Now he has constructed a pattern from this metaphor by observing that at the top of any given peak in the United States Rockies he can see for about one hundred miles. So each new peak he photographs is approximately one hundred miles away. Although such a pattern might seem arbitrary, the photographed peaks can be connected by dots on a map, revealing their own pattern in the making.

With Foster's newest panoramic metaphor and its earlier manifestation on the Tokaido Road, time is once again the leading issue. The geological time that created and placed the Rocky Mountain Peaks in their configuration is for Foster becoming real time, stretching into its own measure, forcing a longer view of the elements of time in our lives. Here in this exhibition is the broadest possible view, a true panoramic vision, of what it is like to see time turn back upon itself.

James Enyeart is the Anne and John Marion Professor of Photographic Arts and the Director of the Marion Center at the College of Santa Fe.