

The Legacies of Mimeticism Reveal the Livingness of Nature's Actuality

This essay is concerned with what I consider the most momentous issue in humanity's active perception of Nature since Leonardo first began studying Nature's image 500 years ago, that is, the deep and fundamental understanding of the "livingness" of Nature made possible by the ever increasing penetration of our perceptions into Nature's reality as light since the invention of the camera. Although thousands of artists came to the conclusion that mimeticism ended with Courbet, in fact it extends to new developments, both through the camera arts and through non-representational arts which extend mimeticism's concern with sourcing their substance in the Creative Process of Nature.

About the same time that Courbet achieved the high point of nature-copying in the old hand-medium of brush and paint, the camera was reaching a stage in its development where it could take over and expand the role of representing Nature's image from the painter. But many Europeans were very hostile to photography as an art form. They considered the camera a mere recording device, and flatly denied its potential as a new art. Their dismay that painting might be displaced by a mere machine, combined with their pathological brooding on the supposed meaninglessness of existence, and hence the implied meaninglessness of Nature herself, caused them to reject the valid extension of the mimetic tradition into future new arts. Deeper searchings into Nature for more fundamental insights into her structural workings were ridiculed rather than appreciated. A cartoon of the times illustrates the general temperament: outside the entrance to the Impressionist exhibition stands a gendarme, advising a very pregnant woman to keep out for fear of danger to the child she carries. Even photography was considered unhealthy, as demonstrated by the public's reaction to an image of a death room. A child in a white dress lay on a sickbed as the concerned physician rested his weary head in his hand and the grief-stricken mother gazed dumbstruck out the window. This image was considered so horrific that a public outcry arose to outlaw photography as art. As for the artists, they became bored by Nature's image and began to consider it of no consequence. They either "advanced" into the introspective arbitrariness of symbolism and its modernist offshoots, or regressed into a false mimeticism of romanticized and industrialized content. They concluded that mimeticism was finished, and that Nature's image was cancelled out of the artist's realm of concern forever. Unfortunately, this attitude still prevails today.

I propose that this attitude is misguided, and that Courbet's achievements and the invention of the camera have in fact opened unheard-of possibilities for future new arts. The first of these I call the "photo-genetic" image, combining the dictionary definitions of the words "photo" (light) and "genetic" (origin). This is in direct contrast to the now outdated media which attempted to make "photo-graphic" depictions of Nature's image, where the word "graphic" indicates the manual application of drawn lines or painted brushstrokes on a two-dimensional surface. I use the new term "photo-genetic" to describe the way in which the camera extends the mimetic concerns of brush-and-paint artists from Leonardo to Courbet into the future. Photogenetic camera art cancels out the need for a manual "translation" of Nature's image by pen and pencil or brush and paint, and replaces it with a medium that works directly with Nature's light. It consciously emphasizes the actuality of *light* as the fundamental source of the camera's image and the primary source of information about Nature's actuality, for the essence of our perception of Nature is light. The photogenetic image recognizes the potentiality of the camera as a new art form, and allows us to see Nature in a deeper and more extensive way than the graphic methods of painting and drawing do. We no longer need to

look at Nature with the eyes of a painter concerned with recording her image by brushing pigment onto a support. We go directly to the light which carries her image into our eyes. We recognize the primacy of the *light* in informing us of Nature's actuality. The photogenetic camera artist emphasizes this aspect of the camera's potential— that it's the *light* that's important, unrelated to any identification with subject matter, whether historical, sentimental, literary, nostalgic, documentary, and so forth. We don't look at Nature's image mimetically anymore, we look at it instead as a revelation of *light* and advance toward a future *new* art with its roots in past mimeticism. The light itself provides the direct content of the photogenetic image. The image is no longer one step removed from the light as it was with the mimetic paint-and-brush artists. Rather than attempting to depict photographic representations of Nature's macro-level creations with brush and paint, our perception of the light itself becomes the content. We get beyond words and get to the actual *experience* of *perceiving Nature* in which light reveals form. We do not concern ourselves with painting photo-graphic images which conjure up second-hand literary emotions-- sentimental scenes, romantic landscapes, and the like. Instead we go directly to the actuality, to Nature's light, which enters our eyes directly and introduces a direct sensory perception of Nature's image unfiltered by any verbalist conditioning. For as Cézanne said, "Never have a word when you need a sensation."

The photographer Randy Pflueger has intuitively understood the unique capacity of the camera to advance beyond simple documentary photography to a new art of light. He accepts Nature's image without question, and records whatever strikes him as interesting or beautiful in the living image that Nature's light presents to him. In work such as his—particularly the images exploring the effects of natural light on wildflowers-- we confirm that a new element has indeed entered humanity's perceptual experience of Nature— the photogenetic representation of Nature's light unique to the perception of the camera artist.

What we're really discussing here is whether the culmination of mimeticism in Courbet's work and the development of the camera signaled the end of Nature's significance to the artist, as so many thousands of artists believed. In fact it did not. Instead it opened up new ways of seeing and experiencing Nature's actuality that extend into the future-- we perceive Nature differently because of the camera. But like the gendarme at the Impressionist exhibition and the 19th century Parisians raising their voices against the promise of photography, we too dismiss Nature's image too easily. Our society has lost touch with the "livingness" of Nature's actuality. Instead of striving to further the reach of our perceptions into Nature, we exploit her selfishly and rationalize our abuse with verbalizations as though we have become altogether independent of Nature. Are we so disassociated from Nature as to consider her unworthy of study or celebration? Don't we realize that only by giving Nature the respect she deserves will she return that respect to us and provide for our continued survival? We need to recapture for ourselves the same union with Nature that we so methodically wrested away from the Native Americans. We must recognize that we ourselves are part of Nature, physically and perceptually.

Pflueger pursues such a union by making photogenetic images of Nature's creations. His chosen medium, the camera, is a very democratizing medium. Anyone with an artist's desire to connect with the reality around him can make images with a clarity and detail that Leonardo could only dream of. These images can be reproduced in quantities that make them available to all. And we have only touched the tip of the iceberg regarding the camera's potential. We can hardly imagine what the future will bring. The photogenetic image will

continue to progress into the future, allowing us to “see images I never saw before” (Cézanne). In the future we’ll experience images beyond our ability to imagine— totally integrated sensory experiences which are virtually indistinguishable from Nature herself. But unless we begin to value Nature as the origin of our humanity and protect her as the source of our continued survival, we may end up with nothing but virtual images to remember her by—cold comfort, indeed.

The invention of the camera was a definitive development, having led to a further reach of our perception into Nature’s image. But it did even more than that. By fully realizing the mimetic goals pursued by artists from Leonardo to Courbet, it also provided a new opening to non-mimetic developments based on our perceptions of Nature. A second outgrowth of the handing-off of mimetic concerns to the camera follows the lineage of Monet and Cézanne as they worked to transition out of direct representation into an art of “only creation” (Cézanne) which would take its creative impulse from Nature’s Structurally Creative Process. This is the direction I have pursued for the last 60 years, which I have written about extensively and which emphasizes the non-representational organizing of space and color with light, through a creative process analogous to Nature’s own. Monet was the first artist to reach beyond photographic representation through his study of the relationship between natural light and color. Cézanne dug still deeper beneath the surface as he strove to understand the way in which Nature organized the image she presented to his eyes. He envisioned an art of “only creation” in which the artist would work in methods parallel to Nature, with results that might cause the viewer to respond to the artist’s work as urgently as Cézanne responded to Nature herself. The New Art which has occupied me for a lifetime strives to evolve Cézanne’s concerns beyond the two-dimensional canvas into a non-representational art of three dimensions as firmly grounded in Nature’s organization of space and light as photogenetic camera art is grounded in Nature’s light-image.

A third artistic direction spawned by mimeticism has hardly begun to be explored. This is the development of a three-dimensional sculptural art which emphasizes the volumetric displacement of space, but which takes its creative direction from Nature’s structure in which form is revealed by light rather than from representational or conceptual concerns or from simplistic and arbitrary decision-making on the part of the artist. Much non-representational sculpture has been made since the advent of photography, but none has deliberately concerned itself with harmonizing its displacement of space with the volumetric methods employed by the supreme creator, Nature. There is much to be done here for an artist willing to make the effort.

These, then, are the New Art legacies that mimetic painting and the invention of the camera left to the future-- the non-representational arts of spatial organization and space displacement which are informed by Nature’s creative processes, and the new photogenetic media which extend the mimetic tradition directly by documenting Nature’s image with Nature’s light. All of these share the mimetic painter’s absolute belief in the perception of Nature as the supreme source of creative inspiration for human art, and recognize a connection with the livingness of Nature as essential to our well-being and survival. For we can’t survive without her.

Charles Biederman, October 2001

My thanks to Neil Larsen for discussing these thoughts with me and arranging them into essay form.

Revised - October 7, 2001 - LoM-LET