

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 11
Issue 1 *Syracuse Scholar Spring 1991*

Article 8

3-21-1991

Reflections on Joel Meyerowitz's photographs

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Recommended Citation

Schmidt, Jan Z. (1991) "Reflections on Joel Meyerowitz's photographs," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/susolar/vol11/iss1/8>

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REFLECTIONS ON JOEL MEYEROWITZ'S PHOTOGRAPHS

JAN ZLOTNIK SCHMIDT

WOMAN AND CHILD: ON A PORCH IN WHITE LIGHT

(Plate 3: Porch, Provincetown)

Where do we go
Auntie Carolyn?

The woman leans over
the porch
head over
hair tumbling

the child
gathers words
presses them into the thick web
of brown tumbling

as if a child's touch
could lighten the drift
could staunch the tumbling
so the woman's
head would not
be heavy
heavy with the weight of it
dark thick
falling

the flattened spin
of the wind

and the child
a slip of ivory
the silver lining
of lunaria

a voice dickering
no proper sound

And Auntie Carolyn
leafed through the day
pleased with the
scent of salt and sand
and wind
pleased with the
starched light

and the child
flat legged
eased into sand
fingers poking a tunnel
grains prickling her skin

Auntie Carolyn
imagining
cowslick grass
curling
under her
over her
beach plums ripe in
the child's throat

AUNTIE CAROLYN SPEAKS TO
THE CHILD

(Plate 3: Porch, Provincetown, 1977 and Plate 11: Provincetown)

Ease into it
Ease into light
Blighted
Blistered
Bugled
Light

You are cheesecloth
Mooncloth
Fingers poking
To let in light
Lips to the sky
You can taste it

The wind flattens
You are spindrift
Sand
Wet nights
Wind
Flat against
Your skin
Salt beads bubbling
On your breasts

A MAHOGANY MIRROR, ROSE,
AND BROCADE

MOLLIE: BLACKBERRY AND BROCADE

(Plate 19: Provincetown, 1977)

she pulls on her dress
rose silk cooling her skin
her profile is flat in the oval
in the corner two figures waver
on the curve of a hill

she turns to the window
the boy laps at the girl
fingers grazing her thighs
the girl heaves then
sharply takes in breath
her legs and thighs wet
with the swill of desire

the girl's eyelids are heavy
too heavy
his face more beautiful
than she could imagine
she'll give in to it
in the shallows

Mollie turns from the window
pulls two stray hairs
into the sweep of brown and grey
light dusts the mirror
the pine plank floors
light skids under her fingernails

in the garden yellow and orange day lilies
purple iris spill open
her child runs

she wants to cry
I am still game
still fair
still young

she wants to taste wild blackberries
rub brocade
feathery pencil blue
rose stitches
flame under her eyelids

VERNA AT CUMBERLAND FARMS

(Plate 14: Provincetown, 1976)

Verna stepped out to the Superette. She would've bought the newborn pampers. Instead she laid her claim—Century 21's. Thought to tell the cashier that her boy would have been the same as the raw-faced crawler on the box by now. Not just her dream of a thing. Her boy would have been bigger n a seed pod. Not just her dream of a thing. Bigger than a thumbnail. Not just her dream. She felt him inside her. Felt that fluttering down the ridge of her back. Imagined the splinter legs kicking, bug eyes bulging. Even a thumb stuck in its mouth. Kicking feet like Dolly's boy, his eyelashes flapping against her cheek when he gave her a smack. And she knew all the time he was she did. That flickering down. And then one day it was done. No bigger than an O. Thumbnail up and second finger. Her nails black tulip petals thrum thrumming the air.

THE WOMAN WAITS IN THE HALL
LOOKING AT LIGHT
FILTERING THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR

(Plate 1: Hartwig House, Truro, 1976)

The light glazed the leaves
a fine sweet syrup
resinous clarified
the tang of it pleased her

The light flooded—unexpected
like the last turn on the bay
of a skipped rock
that strikes the sun
dashes surprise
in her throat
she wished for noise and shadows.

She rubbed her belly
she would wait here for the quickening
while leaves were full
green as lily pads
as the edges of ferns

she rubbed her belly
then flattened her yellow hair
crown to shoulder
with the palm of her hand

it wasn't the waiting that hurt
it was the taste of grief
knowing he'd leave her
until then she'd stem the quiet

in a corner tintype
a mother with thick black curls
holds her child up to the light

THE GREEN WINDOW

(Plate 32: Wilson Cottage, Wellfleet, 1976)

Green as the world
she used to tell him
you are green as the rain forest
as the rubber plants
as the fronds of ferns
elephant ears unfolding
in the swamp

green as the weave of vines
twining the palms

You are my green world

and the boy gazed
at his mother
not knowing
that green
could be a taste
of pleasure
a swallow
thick in her throat

warmth
at the base of her stomach
a lash of breath exhaled
almost tangible smoke

he could bear it all
just not the loss
of that green

He only knows
she spies out windows
and declares

What a dream of a day
green to the bottom of the earth
green to the edge of the sea
green all the way to China

a web of vaporous green and light
thick on her tongue



Wilson Cottage, Wellfleet, 1976. Reprinted, by permission, from Joel Meyerowitz, *Cape Light: Color Photographs* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978). © Joel Meyerowitz.