Southern Regionalism in Postmodern Photography

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Contemporary artists are faced with the challenging question of how best to address the issues of the postmodern era. More often than not, artists use the ethos of the dominant Western culture in their critique of the modern condition. This approach is somewhat problematic, because our culture is not as homogeneous as it was once believed to be (Ownes 58). Rather, we should attempt to focus on the social and cultural differences within the broader society, as a means of critiquing it. Regionalism is a tool now frequently used by artists in an attempt to point out these cultural variations. By using a regional aesthetic, artists may be better able to critique modernity on a global level, as well as how it also affects the particular region. Using the dominant style, artists could not address these issues as successfully. Within Western culture, the U.S. South is the most recognizably distinct region historically. Popular culture has constructed the South as a deviant to the mainstream. Because of this, virtually every visual signifier takes on a different meaning when placed in a Southern context. This has placed visual artists in the South, most specifically photographers, in a unique situation from which to address the world. Using a vernacular regionalist aesthetic, contemporary photographers in the U.S. South are entering into the postmodern discourse by presenting an alternative to the dominant aesthetic tradition.

Regionalism has become an important tool in postmodern art in order to critique the universalizing ideologies of modernity and their socioeconomic consequences. It must be understood, however, that there is a distinction between a postmodern critical use of regionalism, and the nostalgic celebration of an old way of life that is associated with

political conservatism (Dubey 352). The former is a rejection of the dominant culture with a critical use of its media, whereas the latter is a glorification of spatial social orders and a sentimental portrayal of its institutions through an embrace of the dominant culture's media (Harper 72). An important difference must also be made within the scope of postmodern regionalism. The two major methods of regionalism are non-modernism, or as architectural historian Kenneth Frampton calls "Critical Regionalism," and neo-traditionalism (Moore 438). These two methods both have their strengths and weaknesses. Non-modernism attempts to approach a specific location by using a more universal style to produce a representation that is not influenced by modernism. This, however, tends to completely ignore the culture and history of the place. Neo-traditionalism embraces the localized tradition of a given place to produce a point of comparison to the modernist tradition. Neo-traditionalism can be problematic if the practitioner is not careful to ensure he does not perpetuate social disparities. The predominant trend in Southern postmodernist photography has been neo-traditionalism. Perhaps this is because this method is better suited to questioning the historically constructed social disparities that many postmodernists deal with.

There are a variety of explanations for why contemporary photographers in the South produce distinctly regional work. The broader societal conception of the South is that of a spatial hinterland, existing in a pre-modern or not fully modernized state (Dubey 352). Despite the industrialization of the 1970's and the urban and suburbanization of the 1980's and 90's, this perception continues. Therefore, the South as a region can be used to generate discourse with the problems of modernity, because it symbolically exists outside of the postindustrial society we live in. Another point that could also be made is

that because of these changes, the South is no longer, and perhaps never was, a culturally unique region (Hobson 2). The problem with this assumption is that despite any truth to the assertion of an "Americanization of Dixie," the South as a region is still viewed as an outsider. Someone producing regional photographs in New England would never be seen as producing regional art. Whereas any photographer in the South will be framed as regionalist, regardless of whether his work is regional in nature. By overtly producing regionalist work, the photographer can thus take control of the stereotypes by which his work will inevitably be viewed. Regional work also helps present alternative narratives to our culture's grand narrative, and alternative cultural traditions that could be at risk of being lost. This is particularly important for cultural and racial groups who have been historically oppressed by the majority.

There are a number of issues related to tying one's work into Southern regionalism. Most obviously is the specter of the long history of institutionalized racism in the South. The argument could be made that any assertion of Southern cultural difference is intertwined with the idea of racial difference, thus turning it into an assertion of racial hierarchies (Duck 35). Since this problem is implicit, perhaps it produces a means to more directly critique these social disparities if approached, in an appropriate manner. Caucasian photographers, especially, must be extremely aware of the connotations of their work in this regard. If the intentions of their work are unclear, they run the risk of being misunderstood as having some sort of latter-day Fugitive-Agrarian white-supremacist message. Another issue in the assertion of Southern distinctness is it implies to many a social and political conservatism of maintaining the social order of the Old South (Dubey 355). In order not to fall into this trap, the postmodernist must overtly

question this conservatism, or face perpetuating it. Because the regionalist frame is a contract of the art world that can be externally imposed on an artist, there is a question as to whether Southern photographers should produce regional work at all; that is to say, to some extent the reason for that construct's existence is equally the Southern photographer's doing. Because of the regionalist stereotype, some photographers try to separate themselves from the label. William Eggleston has unsuccessfully detached his work from the mythology of Southern regionalism (Zanes 10). Working within any regional tradition comes the concern of limiting one's audience. Perhaps, though, working within such a specific region can point to many more universal truths.

When discussing photography in the South as a form of postmodern regionalism, the question that arises is if there is such a thing as a Southern photographic style. According to an article in the New York Times in 1981, there was then and never had been a unique Southern style (Thornton 2). The assertion was made that all contemporary photography in the South was just mimicking Northern or Western modernism. This conjecture, however, was based on the writer's, Gene Thornton, misinterpretation of a show called "I Shall Save One Land Unvisited." What the writer did not apparently understand was the point of this show was to illustrate that these specific photographers were using modernism in their own specialized way, and it was not meant to be an all-encompassing exhibit (Kass 2). If there is a Southern style it must be understood in how it is differs from other manifestations of regionalism. The Western landscape school, for instance, has a shared set of aesthetic concerns in depiction of a specific subject matter. The place almost becomes totally irrelevant, as its methodology could be transplanted almost anywhere. Southern regionalism, however, is concerned

with the specificities of place first, and foremost (Zanes 10). Any similarities in aesthetics are a vernacular response to dealing with the specifics of place. A Southern photographic style, therefore, cannot be taken out of the context of the region, because the region itself is the primary concern and not an aesthetic. This is why the work of Eggleston, for instance, gets automatically lumped into the Southern "school." The intense interest in place in Southern photography has its roots in history. Reminders of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Great Depression can still be seen and felt every day in the South. It is out of the necessity to address the legacy of these social disparities that postmodern Southern photographers have focused so heavily on place.

To understand Southern regionalism as an aesthetic style beyond just concern with place, one must look to the earliest developments of photography in the South. When photography was first brought to the United States, the South was an agrarian society, and it remained that way for a long time afterwards. Because of this, not only were there fewer photographers in the South than in the North, they were also forced to import most of their photographic materials (Marien 108). Outside of major cities, in the South photographers worked in almost total isolation from other photographers. This led to a number of characteristics unique to nineteenth century Southern photography. On a technical level, because everything had to be imported, most photographers were using dated second or third-hand cameras and lenses. Many of these older lenses produced drastic vignetteing. Because of their isolation, it also took much longer for developments in photographic processes to reach many Southern photographers. As a result, it is not uncommon to find by the late 1800's, examples of photographic processes being used twenty or thirty years after they had been abandoned in the North (Green 3). That is not

to say that all photographers in the South were technically behind the rest of the world; however, it was an understandable trait.

Some photographers made major innovations to the materials they had on hand, as to better suit their situations. This can most drastically be seen in the work of Virginian photographer Michael Miley. Miley produced his own panchromatic glass plate negatives years before they were commercially available, and he invented a successful color process in the 1890's (Fishwick 226). It was the norm for photographers, particularly in America, to be self-taught or at least to have learned from someone who was. In cities in the North, there were camera clubs and salons that shaped aesthetic trends of these photographers. As a result they altered how they photographed to suit the aesthetic trends. In the South these clubs did not exist. Early Southern photographers developed a style that was based solely on how to best work in the conditions they faced. It is often said that the work produced by early photographers in the South was amateurish, as they did not have a grasp on the medium (Campbell 191). Often photographs were taken from unconventional angles, with odd exposures, and often had vignetteing. However, these early photographers were responding in their own vernacular way to place. It helps to understand this work in terms of being the photographic equivalent to folk art.

The Civil War marked an important shift in the history of photography in America. Prior to the war, the majority of photography was done in the studio, and afterwards, works were increasingly done outside (Marien 134). Many Northern photographers headed out West to work, but in the South, photographers pointed their lenses on themselves. History and culture became an important focus, as photographers

tried to make sense of the devastations of war, and the emancipation of slaves. Michael Miley, for instance, produced a large amount of work depicting the effect of war on his county. Out of the confusion of Reconstruction, an interesting thing occurred throughout the South. Itinerant photographers started to roam their regions photographing the people, land, and historical remains they came across. Most regions throughout the South had at least one such photographer, most of whom have slipped into near total obscurity. In Central Virginia, probably the best example would be J. Harry Shannon, also known as "The Rambler" (Shuntz 9). Strong comparisons could be made between these photographers and the French photographer Eugene Atget in style, subject matter, and intent. Like these Southern photographers, Atget was also dangerously close to falling into total obscurity had it not been for the intervention of Bernice Abbott (Marien 288). Perhaps the work of these photographers should be reevaluated in the same way Atget's work has been.

One of the major arguments made against the existence of a Southern style is the effect Northern photographers have had on visually understanding the South. An argument that often gets made is that all Southern regional photography is mimicking the Farm Security Administration (Zanes 11). The FSA's work in the South is extremely problematic, as all the photographers were from the North. The resulting photographs were more a product of the photographer's imagination than of reality, as the rural South was the antithesis of the metropolitan North (Kidd 15). The FSA's work gives an equally fictitious view of the South, as does the movie "Gone With the Wind." It is important to understand that Southern photographers were taking pictures of similar subject matter as the FSA decades before the FSA came to the South, and they continued long after the

FSA left. That is not to say the FSA did not have an influence, but post FSA photographs are working just as much, if not more so, in reaction against the FSA legacy (Hurly 91). It is also interesting to compare the work produced concurrently by indigenous Works Progress Administration photographers to that of the FSA. The Historical Inventory Project in Virginia produced work of similar subject matter to the FSA, but stylistically it is completely different (Campbell 191). The FSA imposed modernist formulations of art on the Southern subject matter, where as the WPA photographers were employing the vernacular aesthetic. This aesthetic can be understood as a style, but it also approaches similar subject matter in a parallel way.

The South has largely been left out of the national myth, as the South is a region that has its own peculiar culture as a result of its common history (Rosengarten 2). Perhaps that is why there is so much interest in questioning the mainstream narratives. Contemporary Southern photographers often employ the historic vernacular aesthetic in their work. An explanation for this trend could be that this aesthetic was the uniquely Southern style before the influence of modernism. Therefore, pointing to this aesthetic is an assertion of the South as a culturally and historically distinct region. Contemporary photographers in the South often use antiquated cameras; shoot from strange angles, and intentionally vignette their pictures. This is done to reference the amateurish style of the early self-taught photographers. This is often coupled with an intense look at the layers of history that exist at a given place. There is often even a discourse between contemporary photographers, and those of the past. Sally Mann, for instance, has rephotographed many of the places that Michael Miley photographed one hundred years before. In addition to the interest in history, many photographers use the family unit to

address the social history of the South (Prince 36). This is often done in a way that also uses the vernacular style, such as the family portraits of Emmett Gowin. He often employs the use of vignetteing as a stylistic element in his work. Another trend can be seen in the work of Caroline Vaughan, who prints with historic photographic processes. Including such elements ties this work not only into the history of Southern photography, but also allows it to act in a socially critical manner from a distinctly Southern perspective. These methods should be understood as different from the nostalgic approach taken by Clarence John Laughlin and other modernist photographers in the South.

The postmodernist Southern photographer questions not only the master narrative presented of the South, but also the South's internal narrative. The former must be done to give the South back its own native voice, in both its depiction in history and also how it is shown in the art world. The latter must be done in order to address the social disparities that continue to exist in the South, which the mainstream narrative pretends do not exist. Acknowledging the South as a distinct region allows discourse to be raised about the state of affairs on a global level. By employing a historically distinctive vernacular regionalist aesthetic, Southern photographers can better address the issues facing the postmodern world, as it questions the dominant narratives of our society.

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