

*Angela West*

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In 1786, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 37, left Frankfurt to travel to Italy for the first time. Exactly a week in to his trek, J.W.v.G. suffered a bout of grand tourist's anxiety. In the Tyrolean town of Bolzano, he found the activity in the market overwhelming and mysterious. Wanting to understand more than he could take in, he consoled himself "that in these statistically-minded times, all this has probably already been written in books, which one can consult if need arise." He then described how he felt about what he'd seen:

At present I am preoccupied with sense-impressions which no book or picture can do justice. The truth is that, in putting my powers of observation to the test, I have found a new interest in life. How far will my scientific and general knowledge take me? Can I learn to look at things with clear, fresh eyes? How much can I take in at a single glance? Can the grooves of old mental habits be effaced? This is what I am trying to discover.

Goethe is trying to describe a feeling he is having. He is traveling, disoriented, and despite his stellar education, uncomprehending. But he can see. And observation begins to move him beyond the strictures of received knowledge and into new forms of awareness. This is the very paradigm of Enlightenment education, which privileged observed natural history over received ideology. Goethe spends a lot of time in his "Italian Journey" talking about glaciers.

Almost exactly 47 years later, and a few mountain ranges away, William Henry Fox Talbot was on his honeymoon at Lake Como. He was attempting to capture the landscape with a camera lucida, but found his attempts to trace the projected image "fruitless." His hand renderings could never approach the "immutable beauty which the glass of the camera throws on the paper in its focus." Platoons of photo-historians have earned their stripes on how Talbot set about capturing those images.

What strikes me about both these accounts is that they were set in Italy. It took the still remote landscape on the other side of the Alps to set these two Northern Europeans to wrestling so hard with qualities of perception. Goethe was trying to see fresh things with fresh eyes. But when Talbot finally did manage to fix the camera image, most of his pictures were made at home, around Lacock Abbey, his estate. This was for technical reasons: exposures were slow, the equipment was homemade and ungainly. But the combination of Goethe's urge to see with fresh eyes, and Talbot's practice of making pictures from whatever was immediately at hand, form the basis for a major strain of photographic practice. While photojournalists have tended to search exotic distances for clear, fresh imagery, art photographers have tended to stay close to home, seeking to see the familiar with Goethe's "clear, fresh eyes."



Angela West is one of those photographers who can't take a bad picture. Her friends secretly resent her for it, but we'd be easier on her if she were content only to make exquisite images. Instead she is a probing, complex, searching artist, sifting and plying her subject through ever-changing filters and prisms of attention. The art world tends to favor a Darwinian approach to production: find a diet niche, and feed there. "I'm the person who paints old cassette tapes," say, or "I make portraits of punters." Angie's subject is home. And her approaches to that subject are glamorously varied. She is a great inheritor of Goethe's injunction re-see the world, and has learned with him to erase the grooves of old habits.

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Strand, Stieglitz, de Meyer, Weston, Callahan, Gowin, Friedlander, Nixon, Mann - an a-list of 20th century photographers- made direct portraits of their spouses and children, and West's pictures of her father sit steady in that pew, though they are unique in their orientation and intent. Most of the above were men photographing their wives, or women photographing their children. Photographers addressing their parents, such as Larry Sultan and Richard Billingham, tend to get knee deep in pathos. West photographs her father as St. Derrell, the stoic patron-saint of Everyday Life: recreating, working, just standing around, picnicking, cloistered, and in prayer.

This reverence for daily pleasures is the real spiritual heart of American values. We are apolitical, antisocial, and worship our individual freedoms. "The pursuit of happiness" should probably precede life and liberty in the Declaration of Independence. If we really wanted to convert the Mideast to Western, Democratic practices, we should pull out now, leaving plasma satellite TVs, weed wackers, Wi-Fi, and microwaves in every home from Khartoum to Kabul. That may sound a tad cynical, but it is meant to remind us how far from the tree of simple truths Angela West's work falls.

West approaches the idea of "Home" determined to pick through its ties to nostalgia with an archaeologist's thoroughness and care. A portrait, to me, is like a business meeting: an accepted forum for a potent interaction; a place to get meaning done. But West surrounds these high points of her history - the kinds of events memories and nostalgia are made of - with establishing shots and cutaways. Her spring hometown landscapes are exquisite non-events, something that drew an eye away from a fight or a funeral. They are atmospheres of potential, with buds beginning to burst. They have an opacity that feels archaeological. They are layered, and seem to mean more than we can fully understand.

Above all, the more one looks into Angie's entire body of work, the deeper it gets. There are bodies of work that if added to this brief catalog, could only turn it into a Greatest Hits record. Everything she touches from her portraits of Sweet 16s and prom-goers and cheerleaders, to her recent floral still lifes and renderings of every corsage ever pinned on her turns to something better than gold; and folded into her purpose, her vision, her sentiment, her intent. She can't take a bad picture, and doesn't seem to have a bad idea in her.

Driving around this country, it is impossible not to be struck by the rising tide of sameness all over. You can get off any highway exit ramp, see the signs of the global corporations, and immediately feel "at home." Homes themselves look more and more alike, built by speculators instead of families. A lot of the more expensive ones look like funeral homes. It is easy to be discouraged by all that. I like to try to imagine Goethe at Lowe's. But don't bother imagining. Instead look at Angela West in her hometown. Look at the investigative energy and dire complexity of her run-in with the familiar. Imagine a country filled with worshippers who, instead of reciting ancient texts all decided to write their own psalms, about their own saints, in their own plain old gardens of Eden.