

This Week In Photography Books: Stephen Gill

Jonathan Blaustein - February 6, 2015 - Photography Books

It's Thursday, which means this column is due later today. Unfortunately, the writing will be sub-standard. We all know things are better once they've had some time to marinate, whether it's pictures or words or chicken teriyaki.

My apologies. It couldn't be helped. This has been one crazy mother f-ing week, and last week was just as challenging.

Have you ever found yourself in a phase where you were forced to stand by your words? When it seemed like the Cosmos was waking up each morning with the express intention of testing you to your core? Checking whether you actually had the stones to follow through on a promise?

Welcome to my world.

Yesterday was one of the hardest days I've had in a while. It began at 6:30 am, with a prompt wakeup by my ever-energetic son. Lots of errands, paying bills, getting the kids off to school. Then I had to teach a class. (Got a new student, too, so it was back to square one.)

From there, still more errands, then a trip to Santa Fe to drop off a picture for a show, and pick up more books with which I can entertain you. (We hope. I always wonder if I might have a day

where I'm more obnoxious than helpful.)

Then, and only then, did I drive to Albuquerque to be interviewed for a PBS television show about my project "The Value of a Dollar." I'd sworn to the producer at the outset that I'd be helpful, relaxed and engaging. The perfect subject, I assured her.

"Don't worry," I said. "No matter what, I'll be low-maintenance."
(Cue the ominous foreshadowing music in your head.)

The shoot went well, and then after a quick beer with a friend, I drove the nearly 3 hours back home at night. The big moon lit the road, but I was too busy trying not to have my brains fall out of my ears to notice its beauty.

I'm done, I reminded myself. Done. I did it.
It's over.

The phone rang early this morning, and I missed the call. I noticed the 505 area code, and realized it was the aforementioned producer. Calling to congratulate me, I wondered?

No such luck. It seems one of the cameras wasn't working right, and we have to shoot the whole interview over again. I took a deep breath, smiled, and told her "No problem. I'll do even better the next time."

Inside, my soul was crying like an inexperienced actor. Deep, overly-emotional sobs, with a shaking chest. But I pretended not to notice, and just got on with being a good sport.

It's one of those core life lessons, I think. If you do the hard work, and push yourself, your life will be richer, and your pictures will improve too.

Some of those lessons, once learned, are hard to unlearn. With respect to photography, one of the classics I picked up years ago was to try to put the camera in odd and unexpected places. (I tell my beginning students that every semester.)

Be creative where you put the camera. Up high, down low, and into the randomest corners you can find. In fact, I said it just yesterday, to that new student. His classmates concurred, assuring him they'd already stuck their cameras inside nasty holes in the wall, into the musty innards of their school's structure.

They loved the resulting pictures, and encouraged their new colleague to do the same.

Because as many of us know, when you stick the camera into wacky places, you never know what you'll find. (Or what boring subject the camera will transform into a bit of ephemeral magic.)

Such is the case with "Pigeons," a new book by Stephen Gill, published last year by the Archive of Modern Conflict in London. Now, I know that bird pictures, and bird books, are something of a cliché. Like I'm always saying about boobs, birds also sell books.

But we've never seen a bird book like this one. Oh no. I'm quite confident of that. Because Mr. Gill stuck his camera into some pretty nasty and dodgy crevices. Under girders, around steel beams. Up where these grayscale flying rats reside, when they're not busy pooping on statues and cooing you to sleep at night.

While I might have gone out of my comfort zone with last week's book, this one is right in line with what I normally like to show. It's innovative, strange, and likable in it's funky ugliness. A great idea, well executed, will always grab my attention.

The use of shallow depth of field is strong, as it highlights the

awkward textures inside the birds' nests. You almost feel the cold and damp, but in a good way. (It won't make you Siri up the EasyJet website to see how cheaply you can get to Sevilla next Wednesday.)

Personally, I hate vermin. Some mice have just eaten the wiring to my car's speedometer for the second time in a few months. It's going to cost me a couple of hundred bucks to fix. Little bastards.

Pigeons I don't mind so much. Probably because we don't have any here in the mountains. (And if we did, we'd likely call them doves.) I get to look at magpies, ravens and eagles instead. Now I'm wondering what their homes look like, and hoping some enterprising photographer will show me where they hide.

Bottom Line: Very cool look inside pigeons domiciles.

























