

re: photographica

Book of the Week ~ Note no. 8

Now and then I receive books as gifts. Not nearly as often as I give them, but it does happen. Gift-givers have to consider my photobook wish list or take a chance that I won't already have a book they think would be great for me.

If I receive a book I already own, I've got license to shop.

When I can buy books for myself, it's rare that I go to a bookstore and browse. Usually, photography sections in new, remaindered, and used bookstores feature familiar mainstream titles, how-to volumes, and lots of books I either passed along or never cared to possess. The average bricks-and-mortar operation can't afford to stock photobooks. Money is tight and I'm not as omnivorous as I used to be. Most often, then, I gravitate toward more obscure, specialized markets. Usually on-line, or in museums.

For my birthday in January, I received a book by Alec Soth I already own (and have written about in a feature for *Black & White* magazine); *Songbook* became a gift certificate at a fine indie bookstore in St. Paul, owned by a local author of some renown whose initials are G.K.

When I took my credit there I was pleased to discover that their photobook section, while not expansive in lineal feet, had been stocked by someone with an eye for quality. How nice to discover the whereabouts of such a buyer! My challenge, then, was to select an appropriate book (or two, if I was willing to pad the credit with some personal funds) to replace the thoughtful gift.

I settled on two. (Surprise, surprise!) One was Ed Templeton's *Wayward Cognitions*, for reasons I will go into in BotW note number 9. The other is a book by an artist I had not previously known. I like to find new bodies of work, and new book approaches; physical browsing makes this pursuit much more productive. And fun, of course.

Ryan Spencer has an eye for drama. First impressions of the images in *Such Mean Estate* suggest dreams, blurry fragments of half-recognized realities. All horizontal in orientation, the reproductions are quite small; nine of them would fit on a page. The page, too, is horizontal. Two pages provide an ample landscape, a big playing field for these duotone works. Between one and four images are strewn across the spreads, glimpses through windows into unfolding scenarios. Perhaps strewn is too casual a word for rectangles deployed level and plumb on the pages. The arrays, however, demonstrate no consistency, no motif except randomness.

Recall the dreamlike quality of the work. Randomness is organic, even essential to the oneiric cinema. Label it surrealism to put a semi-structured spin on the experience. And be sure to note how flickering afterimages linger in the six grey-scale rectangles that progress from white to black in the course of the image section.

A better-informed cinephile than I would probably recognize these stills; they were made from screens. The copyright page pulls back the curtain; Spencer's photographs are registered as "unique panchromatic instant prints, 2.9 x 3.7 inches each." Ruler in hand, the images measure up roughly in those dimensions. "Instant prints"—Polaroid, Instax, Fuji FP3000B, etc.—are, for the most part, unique, never exactly reproducible. Spencer's windows, then, are portals into films, frames within the cinematic frame, views rendered in black-and-white—aka panchromatic—to further abstract from the source.

Spencer's excerpted cinema is beautifully complemented by an essay that infiltrates, animates, and humanizes the images. Jamison's words inhabit the dream spaces, and offer their own Surrealist tour of the proffered narratives. The text is simultaneously oblique and factual—a perfect amplification of the photographs.

All in all, *Such Mean Estate* (the title a phrase from a nineteenth-century hymn by William Chatterton Dix set to the familiar tune of "Greensleeves" (<https://youtu.be/bg0-n47JQFM?t=1m4s>)) is a fascinating course through truth and fantasy, in a landscape well-suited to the journey.

Such Mean Estate

Photographs by Ryan Spencer

Text: "Catechism," essay by Leslie Jamison

Design: Takaaki Okada

Published by powerHouse, 2015

ISBN 978-1-57687-736-4

*Acquired at Common Good Books, St. Paul, with credit from
exchanged gift*

Link to LibraryThing record for this Book of the Week
(<http://www.librarything.com/work/17200850/126473841>)

Link to "Such Mean Estate" on Ryan Spencer's web site (<http://ryanspencerphoto.com/such-mean-estate.html>)

p.s. This note was to have been published February 25 as Book of the Week number eight.

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