André Kertész: The Polaroids by André Kertész

A powerful collection of the luminous last work by one of the true giants of twentieth-century photography. After the death of his wife, André Kertész consoled himself by taking up a new camera, the Polaroid SX70. As with earlier equipment, he mastered the camera and produced a provocative body of work that both honored his wife and lifted him out of depression. Here Kertész dips into his reserves one last time, tapping new people, ideas, and tools to generate a whole new body of work through which he transforms from a broken man into a youthful artist. Taken in his apartment just north of New York City’s Washington Square, many of these photographs were shot either from his window or in the windowsill. We see a fertile mind at work, combining personal objects into striking still lifes set against cityscape backgrounds, reflected and transformed in glass surfaces. Almost entirely unpublished work, these photographs are a testament to the genius of the photographer’s eye as manifested in the simple Polaroid.

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My Personal Review:
André Kertész (1894 - 1985) captured his first photograph while working as a clerk at the Budapest stock exchange in 1912. A member of the Austro-Hungarian Army during WWI, Kertész photographed his experiences of the war until he was wounded in battle in 1915. Unfortunately, many of the images he captured during this time were lost during the Hungarian Revolution of 1918.

Thereafter, this preternaturally gifted poetic soul traveled to Paris (in 1925), where he worked as a freelance photographer and published three books of his images; and on to New York (in 1936), where one of the 20th Century’s most gifted photographers was effectively cold-shouldered by the photographic "establishment" and relegated to taking pictures of
architecture and home interiors for House and Garden. In what must be one of the most egregious oversights in photographic history, not a single one of his images was selected for Steichen's famous The Family of Man exhibition in 1956! It was only after Kertész retired from commercial work (in 1962) that he was again able to devote his considerable powers of observation and feeling to the same "simple" everyday subjects of his "amateurish" youth. Kertész left behind a legacy of beautiful, melancholic tonal poems for all future generations of aspiring photographers to marvel at; and to marvel at the breadth and depth of his feeling for the human condition.

As the short publisher's note above describes, Kertész was despondent after his wife's death. But his beautiful soul awakened anew after Graham Nash (member of the folk-rock band Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young) gave him a Polaroid SX-70 camera. Kertész trained his poetic eye mostly on things in his apartment (and a special little abstract acrylic sculpture whose form reminded him of his departed wife); but, oh the wonders his delicate imagery reveals about himself and his world. And through his wondrous art, we see a little more of the world we think we know, but experience mostly at a distance, without the magic that only a poet with a camera can reveal.

Where a photographer like Minor White (whom I hold in great esteem) deliberately used essentially unrecognizable abstract forms to communicate inner states, Kertész instead used immediately recognizable shapes and symbols to convey the nature - and feeling - of his connection (or, more often than not, dis-connection) to the world around him. The fragile interconnected bond between artist and humanity was the real "subject" of Kertész's poetic gaze; and we can all feel it, as we look upon the shapes and tones of his otherwise "ordinary" subjects. His work is less about the traditional subjects of photographs (people, places and things), and more - much more - about his feelings about his relationships with the traditional subjects that came within view of this gentle artistic soul.

This is a beautiful little book that anyone who is interested in fine-art photography (in the truest sense of the word) would undoubtedly treasure.

"The moment always dictates in my work. What I feel, I do. This is the most important thing for me. Everybody can look, but they don't necessarily see. I never calculate or consider; I see a situation and I know that it's right, even if I have to go back to "get the proper lighting." - André Kertész.

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