

Making Pictures (extract)

Ian Jeffrey

(....)

Family life, the seasons and the surrounding town, the ostensible content of John Peter Askew's study, are there as a ground on which providence makes its marks. These notable moments, once called decisive moments, need a commonplace context, for that is where they are found. It would be hubristic to brag about them -and they have to be hidden away or under-played. Providence is sensitive and might fail to deliver if pursued too hard. Revelations can be disguised, of course, and classed with gentler categories such as still-life. There are many still-lives here, often of fruit in raking or mottled light. There is a picture of fish remnants on a napkin glinting in the light. Buson, who was preferred to Basho by Moriyama, wrote a poem about "the light of the sun this morning from the head of a sardine" (Persinger 2013: 15). In another poem he sees happiness "beyond anything I deserve" in an overflowing basket of baby yams (Buson 2013: 178). In this collection happiness is repeatedly found in simple delights; a pan of fried eggs, a bowl of cherries, a bucket of milk. In a picture describing a state of unmitigated joy a young girl takes as if her first flight, her arms swept back as wings of a swooping swallow. It is not quite haiku but near enough for she glides and delights.

Like a Haiku writer, John Peter Askew notes times of the year: the fruit of early or late summer, delphiniums, tulips and roses – all of which have their seasons. Winter is variously a time of packed snow and light snow – sprinklings and coverings on roads. Sometimes he finds and takes pure haiku subjects: a picture, for example, of a woman in winter carrying water in buckets on a shoulder yoke across a frozen landscape. Under her heavy, worn, muted winter coat we glimpse a brightly patterned dress. Snow falls on the lens of the camera making marks. It is a picture with two parts, in the manner of a haiku: the walking woman and the snow on the

lens. Somewhere else he was lucky enough to find what looks like a complete figure in the shape of still water, sky blue in a barrel painted green: sky and earth have come together, made a motif brought to life by a droplet. Someone opening a tin of meat or fish has cut his/her finger in a small event in two parts. Although a drop of water and a cut finger are slight matters they are the stuff of haiku where it is the format that counts, one ordinary thing in a relevant relation to another. The photographs asked to be searched for that aforementioned elusive key or masterstroke.

Somewhere, on a beautiful lake in the evening, he noticed that a ramshackle jetty painted blue was numbered 3, as an example perhaps of bureaucracy in paradise. The puzzle of John Askew's photography is worth following through. He is surprised, it seems, to see that things are so modestly the way they are.

Ian Jeffrey is one of the most important art historians in Britain, who has consistently addressed the nature and development of photography as an art form throughout his career. He is the author of several influential books from *The Real Thing: An Anthology of British Photographs 1840–1950*, (1974) and *Photography: A Concise History* (1991) through to Phaidon's *The Photography Book* (1997) and *How to Read a Photograph* (2008). He has also written extensively about individual artist-photographers including Jeff Wall, Diane Arbus, Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey.

This is an extract from the essay included in the book WE published by Kerber Verlag in 2019 to accompany John Peter Askew's exhibition at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art, Sunderland, UK.