

# Making Pictures

Ian Jeffrey

John Peter Askew makes pictures. He composes with many elements, with patches of colour, with orbs, discs, blocks and slices, and with geometrical figures, circles and quadrilaterals of all sorts. There are patterns to be discerned in his way of structuring pictures just as his pictures are overflowing with patterned fabrics, tablecloths, wallpapers and crockery. Altogether these components are elements in a game, they pose questions. His pictures asked to be studied, in the first instance to see where the fulcrum or the dividing line lies, or if it is there at all. It might be an interval between two equal figures or it might be set to one side, asymmetrical and oblique. There are many balanced pictures in this collection. Symmetry is present, either in the whole or in some aspects. Sometimes they may involve little more than a figure in relation to its shadow – or to a blurred reflection. There are partial symmetries and structures within structures, some obvious and some discreet. All of the photographs have such elements. It is as if pictorial elements are counters in a board game which may finally come together, if one is lucky. He catches some of his subjects as they make compositions of their own: children, for instance, editing pebbles; an elaborate arrangement of fruit on a plate; bowls stacked in a graceful arc after being washed. He makes studious pictures to make visible how the world touches us. He has preferred and straightforward ways of structuring pictures. In 1900 photographers often looked for ratios, suggesting that they could see through mere appearances to a harmonic sub-structure. John Peter Askew's approach, however, is more that of an artisan undertaking a job. Artisans have rules of thumb and reliable ways of setting things up. A reliable approach will yield a predictable and useful outcome. Photographers have not always been concerned with picture-making, often choosing to think of the photograph as a copy of a sensuous or expressive original. Some photographers were unrelentingly observant and carried

their sharp ways of seeing to all corners of the known world. But in these pictures there is always a composition to consider, something assembled and vicariously tangible.

John Peter Askew is a believer in pictorial arrangements. He is a modernist artist, in the style of Cezanne working in the 1880s and '90s. Cezanne said in 1904 that painting from nature was not copying the object but realizing one's sensations, and that might apply to these photographs which are imbued with feeling and full of small adjustments. You might in one of the photographs find several hues of blue and brown, and as many comparable motifs: feet, for example, touching, wood, sand or pebbles. These small sensations might be hung around overlapping verticals. This is an account of a bathing scene featuring two children and a young woman on a diving board taken at a lake in summer. Cezanne's art was increasingly of adjustments placed around a central opening or space, one mark made to complement another.

Cezanne wanted to make good pictures, but he was cagey. He believed that there was a mystery, that if the colour was right the drawing would be "more exact". There was something innate in art that could be brought out by good attentive practice. You had to be "workmanlike" to begin with and to paint "in accordance with the qualities of painting itself". John Peter Askew is equally workmanlike in his approach, attentive to the phenomenology of photography and its mercurial qualities and just as concerned to make successful arrangements, pictures that work or are right. He works with deft touches of light and colour. Cezanne thought that a picture succeeded if the "effect" was "based on the existence of a dominating patch". There was some sort of a key, a masterstroke. The picture had to be searched with the idea of the key in mind, but it was perhaps just the possibility of there being a key that really mattered. John Peter Askew is never quite certain of the absolute worthiness of his pictures because his criteria, like Cezanne's, are just proposals, always still to be tested. If his criteria were firmer pictures they could be realised on demand but that would deprive them of their all-important serendipity. In his work

equal weight is given to thought and intuition. From time to time you find in his images rhymes, repetitions and reversals that cannot have been planned, that emerged as the picture was being taken. These are signs of the providential.

His pictures have to be inspected for their secrets, for their lightning strikes and unexpected rhymes. There is always the mystery of what sort of requirements they fulfil, of how they satisfy intuited aesthetic norms and in some cases go beyond them. His pictures are to some degree about these aesthetic questions, about the making or uncovering of art. He sees preparations in the shape of chopping, weighing and setting aside – of tomatoes, for example. His friends prepare meals and make displays of fruit, temporary compositions. They cook, sometimes on open fires in uncovered pans that show their multi-coloured contents. All these ingredients could be part of a palette. Sometimes these pans and dishes have unified monochrome contents, as if temporarily perfected and waiting for disturbance. The photographer likes the idea of a lull or temporary pause before something happens. Meals are prepared and displayed, made up of dishes on coloured cloths. Eventually the meal is finished, and the residues are just as colourful. The original composition, tidily placed, has been blurred and rearranged and by unchoreographed common consent it has been completed, judged to be over. Poetry, in these domestic settings, comes and goes in surges and waves.

Meals are prepared, set out, eaten and cleared away, leaving a memory and a template. They are part of the wider recurrent everyday activities that are yet creative and touching on artistry. John Peter Askew draws our attention to these and they can be understood as metaphors for the process of making art. In addition, of course, the pictures are documents, dealing with the lives of people in a certain town – with churches, fun-fairs, markets, playgrounds, kiosks and shops. His townscapes, however, often look like transit zones and parts of any town. Crossroads without obvious signs link nowhere in particular. The town is only a concept in comparison with all of those tangible mealtimes and the promise of those embroidered tablecloths.

What he imagines is a down-to-earth “floating world” constituted of fruits, vegetables and patterned bright fabrics. It exists in actuality and stars real people, their families, their pets. Topography, though, is another matter, redolent of time-tables and it is to be avoided as are identities and names which are exclusive. The collection was made while John Peter Askew lived as a guest of the Chulakov family, who are there to be discovered although it is hard to be sure for the pictures were taken over the years, long enough for children to become adults and to have their own children. The effect of this is to create a place that although specific, is generic, and its inhabitants live in an extended simultaneous time. The seasons are ever-present, but they fuse, one winter with another. Summer’s remnants, in the shape of toys and fruits, linger on.

Photographers when they report on other cultures like to note ceremonies from the structural fabric. They attend burials and weddings, noting the passing of the generations. John Peter Askew for the most part avoids such epochal cultural markers, as if he wants to convey the impression of a cultural continuum. A still, gentle place of quiet patterns, rhythms and symmetries. The Family of Man, when mooted in the 1950s, was distinctly multicultural, more of a spectacle. This family is credible, having more to do with daily life, the ineffable, overlooked routines of the everyday, selecting vegetables or looking for shade on a hot day. At one point a heavily bearded man rides a child’s bicycle, turning back the clock in jest.

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". In another poem he sees happiness "beyond anything I deserve" in an overflowing basket of baby yams. 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 Peter Askew's photography is worth following through. He is surprised, it seems, to see that things are so modestly the way they are.

## References

Buson, Y., (2013) *Collected Haiku of Yosa Buson*, trans. W. S. Merwin and Takako Lento (Port Townsend WA: Copper Canyon Press)

Doran, M., ed., (2001) *Conversations with Cézanne*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press) trans. Julie Lawrence Cochrane

Persinger, A, (2013) *Foxfire: the Selected Poems of Yosa Buson*, a Translation, Theses and Dissertations Paper 748, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Digital Commons [online] available <https://dc.uwm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1753&context=etd>

**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 essay was 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.