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Illusory Perspectives: Edward Weston

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Abstract

Photographer Edward Weston was famously able to capture unexpected beauty—no matter if his subject was fruit or human. This essay locates Weston's artistic vision within the modernist movement of the first half of the twentieth century and uses two well-known images to illustrate Weston's unique talent for transcending the boundaries between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, being and nonbeing in his desire to encourage the experience of introspection and contemplation in viewers.

Edward Weston possessed the uncanny ability to transform his photographic subjects into neutral objects; whether he was working with an anthropomorphic pepper or a shapely lower human torso, Weston's trademark of creating sharp, surreal and modernistic images is truly prevalent in his disconnected work of both inanimate and animate subjects. Weston's *Pepper No. 30* (1930)—arguably his most famous work that included a humanoid fruit—set the tone for his abstract collection of disconnected earthly figures-turned-dreamlike structures. Weston himself described peppers as “always excitingly individual,” figuratively turning the aspects and purposes of peppers into those of humans, and blatantly planting individuality—loosely defined as the ability to carry yourself differently from others, that which makes you who you are—on its head.¹ The pepper becomes more than just an object for décor or consumption in a salad; it becomes an individual comprised of bent angles, subtle scars, and beautifully delicate lines that disassociate it from any other pepper. On the other hand, the opposite is displayed through the composition of a female's lower torso that radiates coldness and stillness. Weston generates surrealist subjects through his photography by disconnecting the subjects in his images from any outside disruption. And although Weston's prints of anatomical beings are not manipulated by post-portrait technicalities or wisdom, they are manipulated by the viewer's mind, causing a conscious reaction to what the viewer notices—and what the viewer desires to see.

Weston's famous work *Pepper No. 30* is the image that truly bends all perceptions of reality and the illusory: imagine standing in a large room containing four tall, blank white walls and no windows, with only the image of Weston's pepper superimposed on one of the walls under dim lighting. While viewing the image, the spectator notices the faint, soft lines that lead up and down the sides of the pepper, the pale lighting that bounces off its upper portions, and the angle at which the pepper sits in the middle of the frame. But as the spectator continues to gaze at the fruit, those faint lines begin to travel up and down the appearance of a body, the pale lighting glares off of the arms and back, and the pepper's spine appears to slouch in a timid manner. The pepper becomes human; not because of Weston's own hand, but because of Weston's attention to the viewer's senses.

Weston would become a future member of Group f.64 (the group wouldn't be inaugurated until 1932), a small fraternity that included Weston, Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, among others. David Peeler describes the group as “dedicated to a purely aesthetic plan, promoting the modernist genre of straight photography” and representing the highest “clarity and sharpness possible” by using the tiny aperture setting of f.64 on the camera lens. Weston captured his photographs straight on and used a photographic technique titled the “zone system” to pre-determine what his negatives would look like after the photo-taking process was complete; this was Weston's only hands-on influence throughout the technical process.² Weston was also influenced by the photographic ideals of Alfred Stieglitz, who “developed a modernist creed that offered the seriousness, clarity, and intensity” that Weston desired.³ Weston himself described

¹ Edward Weston, *The Flame of Recognition: Edward Weston*, ed. Nancy Newhall, (New York:

Aperture Foundation, 1997), 33.

² David P. Peeler, “The Art of Disengagement: Edward Weston and Ansel Adams,” *Journal of*

American Studies 27 (1993): 320.

³Ibid., 313.

theses modernistic ideals as “a heritage we have to carry on—from Stieglitz and his group.”⁴ Nevertheless, Weston successfully engineered his own procedure into the image by placing the pepper into a small tin funnel—the only physical evidence of his hand. Weston employed the funnel’s uniformed interior to add reflected light to the pepper’s many important contours and completely disconnected the fruit from its born duties. The image, as Weston describes, is by far the best negative he had created for his series of peppers.⁵ The fruit bends the mind and becomes more than a pepper, as Weston recalls, becoming “abstract...completely outside subject matter.”⁶ Weston documents in his notes that the pepper carried “no psychological attributes, no human emotion(s) are aroused.”⁷ The pepper becomes otherworldly and “takes one beyond the world we know in the conscious mind.”⁸ As described above, the pepper becomes more than an edible fruit; it becomes an individual—an individual among peppers. The fruit carries a larger purpose; it orders sympathy from the viewer and it calls to be looked upon. The viewer becomes attached and can empathize with the subject, since the pepper now appears lifelike. The pepper begins to have a personality and now completely transcends the realm of all other grocery store produce. The fruit’s ability to complicate a viewer’s general assumptions about peppers is detailed beautifully by Weston, and this consciousness-splitting image took time to create, once again suggesting the photographer’s attentiveness to viewers’ sensibilities.

Not only does the viewer draw inferences and conclusions about how Weston intended the pepper to be understood, but the informed viewer also recognizes that the artist’s techniques fulfill all Group f.64 guidelines—guidelines that contribute to the mind-bending that occurs inside the spectator’s head. First, the fruit’s portrait is captured from an unusual angle that begs the viewer to stare obtrusively; what is the importance of viewing an edible subject’s concavity and beauty if the subject shall be eaten within the hour? Weston perfectly demonstrates the ethos of modernist photography, intending to exhibit the pepper in a way that has never been considered before. Second, the pure, crystalline nature of the pepper is captured with expertise in the final print. Weston’s use of the zone system is fulfilled brilliantly, reflecting the photographer’s famous ability to understand how dense the negative will be before the shutter is released. And lastly is the blantant surrealist inspiration. Weston places the object into a deep, dreamlike scenario that would make most viewers pinch themselves after gazing on the curves of the pepper’s shoulders. Weston thus becomes the grandfather of science fiction/fantasy photography and displays the blueprint for produce models. (Unfortunately, if all fruits and vegetables were viewed in this manner, scurvy and a depressed vitamin D intake may sweep the public.) Regardless of malnutrition, Weston successfully reaches his goal, as well as the goal of the nascent Group f.64, to “[avoid] social issues of the moment,” while making “nature’s enduring beauty the focus of their personal and professional lives.”⁹

The slow and steady transformation of a pepper into a human figure sounds like something that belongs in the realm of science fiction/fantasy, and the same might be presumed in reverse. *Nude 1925* (1925) reveals the exact personality and abstract pleasure that accompanies *No. 30*. The composition pictures a female—known as “A.”—who appears to be crouched over, shivering in an unheated room, in dim lighting that shallows her space. But the shape she creates is that of abstract proportions and only her backside is visible; Weston states that the body possesses “exquisite lines, forms and volumes” that fabricate a different being.¹⁰ Weston fabricates the

⁴Ibid., 314.

⁵Weston, *The Flame of Recognition*, 34.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peeler, “The Art of Disengagement,” 312.

¹⁰ Edward Weston, *Edward Weston Nudes*. Remembrance by Charis Wilson. (New York: Aperture
Inc., 1977), 10.

subject into an object: no emotion is witnessed, no personality is active, and conscious interpretation turns into “presentation.”¹¹ This image, created five years prior to *No. 30*, is the stepping stone in Weston’s modernist/surrealist creations. The fine lines and subtle curves of A.’s body are gentle and unthreatening. The viewer stares closely, yet, unlike the pepper, the object may be easier to view and understand; instead of distorting the mind, Weston openly presents what he is attempting to generate. Nevertheless, the same ethos and values are evident in this image as in the pepper: isolation of the subject, detachment from the outside world, exhibiting the subject at a massive size, the subject as the only focus in the image. Shelley Rice noted Weston’s nude images rejected psychological examination “in favor of the presentation of the body for its purely aesthetic properties.”¹² Ironic it is indeed that emotion and psychological expression are prevalent in the presence of a single pepper and not in a slouched individual. Yet this speaks to Weston’s understanding of individuality in these two images: the pepper yearns to be desired and to be viewed as more than simply dinner, while the nude subject hides from individuality, attempting to obscure any unique identity by disassociating itself from any external—and possibly internal—exposure. As *Nude* is displayed to the viewer, the mind can’t help but struggle to determine whether or not the focused structure is real or abstract. The viewer wants to associate it with a human face, but this possibility is wiped away and is instead replaced with an association that appears to be lifeless. Weston once again prevails in his attempt to seize beauty in a purely natural subject, while also leaving the viewer to question his/her own identity and how easily that identity can be distorted to appear both physically and emotionally empty.

Charles Millard sums up Weston’s complex vision in stating that Weston’s nudes carry “tremendous presence” despite suggesting “the presence of an object and not that of a human body,” while the presence of his “fruit [and] vegetables...is deeply sensual.”¹³ The thoughtfulness and tender care Weston devotes in both his nude images and fruit portraits cause the viewer’s consciousness to interpret them just as Weston intended. The abstraction frustrates distinction between subjects and objects, causing originality to become reality—the nude—and reality to become particular—the pepper. The surreal is blended with the abstract, creating a whirlwind of form and lines that transform boldly and sympathetically what a viewer once considered ordinary. Weston’s fondness for the abstract is obvious in its power to elicit “a more introspective state of being, a deeper intellectual consideration of the subject matter.”¹⁴ Simple presentation—of course, the principles of Weston are not so simple—may have been Weston’s goal, but pleasant images to gaze upon is the tip of the iceberg. Weston invented images that appear effortlessly beautiful, but he ever so slightly fabricated their beauty: a pepper is posed and cared for so conspicuously that it promotes the human emotion to sense pain, sympathy, or possible sexual desires; while a human nude is positioned and captured so elegantly that any form of sentiment becomes stagnant, prompting a feeling of loneliness or neutrality. However, these feelings are absorbed through perspective. Weston acknowledges that no particular interpretation was intended with the nude figure, and—most likely—with the pepper. Building one’s own perspective is vital when confronted with these two images. Weston may not have insisted on his own interpretation, but the interpretations of viewers are inevitable.

These illusory perspectives envelop any ideologies or elaborate intuitions about Weston’s possible intentions when fabricating his popular subjects through film. His illusions are photographed and documented beautifully, leading viewers to question their own individuality and exhibiting how easy it can be to transform a ripe piece of produce into a concerned human being or to morph a crouching person into a breathless object. Weston hoped his viewers would utilize their “intuitive [selves]” in order to make sense of his work and appease their own desires.¹⁵ Whether or not those desires are fulfilled can only be answered by each individual viewer.

¹¹ Weston, *The Flame of Recognition*, 18.

¹² Shelley Rice, “The Daybooks of Edward Weston: Art, Experience, and Photographic Vision,” *Art Journal* 36 (1976):127.

¹³ Charles Millard, “Adams, Weston, Bullock,” *The Hudson Review* 26 (1973): 355.

¹⁴ Weston, *Edward Weston Nudes*, 10.

¹⁵ Weston, *The Flame of Recognition*, 34.

By masterfully educating viewers on perspective through his photographic innovations and techniques, Weston pushes illusion to new heights and questions the nature of being altogether.

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