

*Published on the occasion of Mac Adams: Crimes of Perception, works from 1970's, opening
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Nine things I learned from the art of Mac Adams.

by David Company

One



Let's embrace the hybrid character of photography. In Mac Adams' pictures you will find allusions to detective stories and news reportage, crime scenes and film noir, the Nouveau Roman and the photo-roman, movie publicity and film frames, snapshots and high art, advertising and the still life, voyeurism and exhibitionism, glamour and horror, sculpture and painting, literature and architecture. When he began to make these works the reigning dogma in photographic art was still very much about purity, about finding the ground and the qualities that belonged to the medium alone. That was becoming something of a dead end. Why shouldn't photography accept and enjoy the overlaps with the other arts? Moreover, might this hybrid approach actually cast new light on what really is particular about the medium?

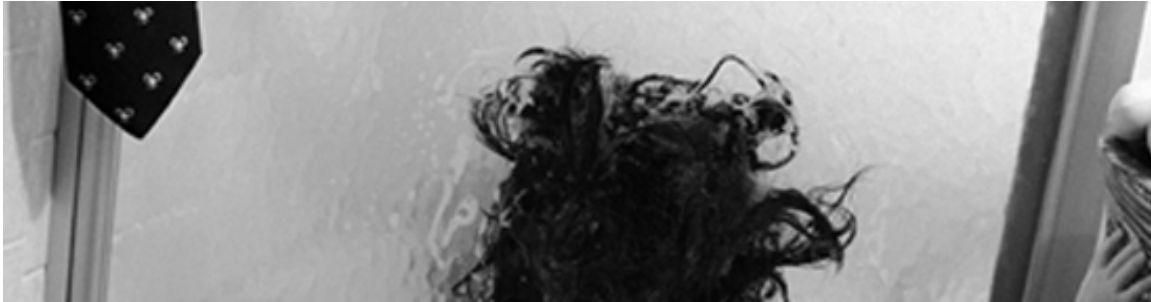
Two

The gallery is an operating table and a stage set, to which the different potentials of photography are brought. These two metaphors – operating table and set – map very well onto what seem to be the two key impulses of the medium: the forensic interest in detail and the cinematic interest in mise-en-scène or staging. These impulses are so forcefully present today because all photography in art is somehow obliged to enter a dialogue either with the notion of visual evidence or with the culture of the moving image in which the still image finds itself. Or both. Mac Adams does both.

Three

Watch carefully. Economy of means and economy of expression have been vital to Mac Adams throughout his career, be it in photography, or sculpture or installation. But his deftness and precision only serve to highlight the ambiguity of communication and the essential openness of all images. Looking at Adams's diptyches is like watching a close-up magician. Everything seems clear and lucid, everything seems graspable but suddenly something has slipped your attention. The magician does it once more. You watch intently. It's gone. The key has vanished between one certainty and another.

Four



Everything starts in the middle. Agatha Christie would often start writing her detective fictions with the outlandish murder of the finale and the unexpected motive. From these she would work backwards, reverse engineering her plots so that they would always go where they were predestined to go. Mac Adams has spoken of a certain debt to, or influence from Christie. However his photographs are not ‘whodunnits’. They’re not even ‘whydunnits’, or ‘howdunnits’. All those forms are essentially linear, and explanatory. Adams’s scenarios are *suspended*. They are middles with beginnings or endings. They are more like the tableau vivant or loop. We come in somewhere in the middle and we leave somewhere in the middle, and we must make of it what we can. There is no explanation, no final settling of accounts. No pointing the finger.

Five

Photography has many time zones. I sense Mac Adams has much in common with Nicolas Roeg, the director who once described cinema as a time machine. The syntax of Adams' diptychs is reminiscent of Roeg's editing. A mix of formal analogy, temporal leaps and associative linkages. More often than not filmmakers and critics tend to see photography as a raw and elemental unit, awaiting cinematic articulation as one of twenty-four per second. Yet, away from cinema we can see that photography has always had its own complex engagement with time, with duration, and with movement. Think of the 'decisive moment', the pregnant moment, the constructed tableau, flash photography and the long exposure, to name a few of its different temporalities. To these we must add all the procedures of assembly that have been so crucial to the development of photography: the album, the archive, the diary, the photo essay, montage, collage, sequences, pairing and juxtapositions (not to mention all the new modes opened up by electronic technologies). The time of photography deserves a philosophy every bit as sophisticated as that extended to cinema. The work of Mac Adams would be.

Six



‘Narrative’ is a noun and an adjective. An image can simply be narrative without belonging to ‘a’ narrative. Actually photography is pretty lousy at narrating in the conventional sense but it’s quite perfect for suggesting narrative possibilities. Often we sense these possibilities when they are set in motion by the most succinct and minimal means. An ambiguous gesture. A stray object. An allusive composition. An enigmatic detail. An action pointing beyond the frame. Whatever else it is, Mac Adams’s photography is a rich inventory of such things.

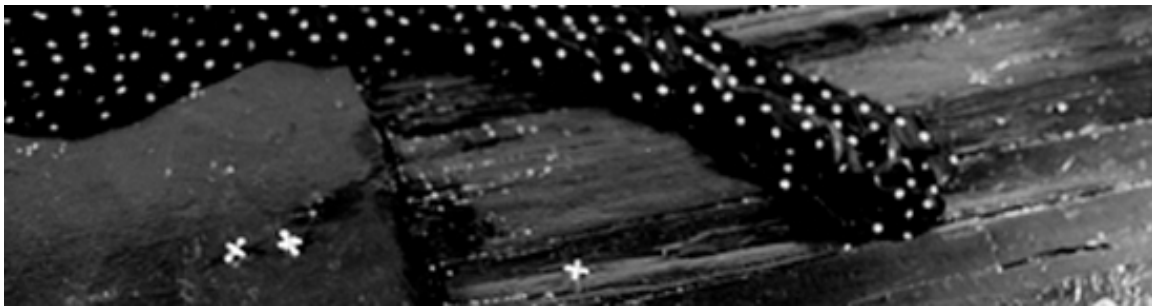
Seven



Diptyches are difficult but Mac Adams makes it look easy. The diptych is one of the most challenging of modes for art and particularly for photography. Challenging both for makers and audiences. This is because it undoes the formal unity of the single image but shuns the comfort of the extended sequence. In a diptych there is no flow, but a shuttling to and fro. A seductive and confounding short-circuit. Two images. One gap. Look before you leap. Mac Adams calls this ‘The Narrative Void’.

Eight

The best things often fall into the void. Art history has its voids, and for a while it looked as if Mac Adams' early photography was to be lost, somehow misplaced between overly tidy accounts of Conceptualism at the start of the 1970s and the Postmodern Art of the decade's end. But that period in between was so rich for photography, perhaps the richest there has ever been. And this was precisely because it was so messy, so uninterested in categories and boundaries. Everything was up for grabs, nothing was off-limits, and artists went at the high speed of creativity, not the sluggish speed of the market. Adams's work exemplifies the particular balance of promiscuous exploration and rigor we also find in the work of James Collins, John Hilliard, Victor Burgin, Robert Cumming, Barbara Kasten, Eileen Cowin, John Divola and Ger van Elk. Critics in the mid-1970s even referred to a discernible 'narrative turn' in photography. In 1977 it was notable enough to have a presence of its own at the now legendary Documenta 6 in Kassel, Germany. This was before Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, before Robert Longo and Jeff Wall. Maybe it was less glamorous, less concerned with spectacle and consumerism and it came to be overlooked for a while. But it's no surprise today's audiences and critics are looking again, not to correct the past but to recognise the continued relevance of the work. Finally we might be getting the past we deserve, the past we need right now.

Nine

All great art strikes us as contemporary. This is so even when we know full well it could only have been made when it was made. In fact the hold that the present may have on the art of the past is often intensified by its historical qualities. Think of the paintings of Johannes Vermeer or Edward Hopper, the films of Robert Bresson or Jean-Luc Godard. We'd be foolish not to see them as contemporary, not to see them as rightfully ours. There is no denying the period detail of Mac Adams's photographs – the clothes, the objects, the décor, the chairs and tables. But the *concerns* – with perception, seduction, privacy, looking, pleasure, evidence, artifice and knowledge - they are timeless, they abide. They belong to every era and we are free to claim them as our own.



David Company is a writer and curator. His books include *Art and Photography* (Phaidon 2003), *Photography and Cinema* (Reaktion, 2008), *Jeff Wall: Picture for Women* (Afterall/MIT, 2011), *Rich and Strange* (Chopped Liver Press, 2012), *Gasoline* (MACK, 2013) and *Walker Evans: the Magazine Work* (Steidl, 2013). His essays appear in many magazines including *Aperture*, *Frieze* and *Tate*. This year he curates shows of the work of Mark Neville (The Photographer's Gallery, London) and Victor Burgin (Ambika P3, London). In 2012 he received the ICP Infinity Award for Writing.