





BY
PAUL
HESTER

Mount a map on the wall. Throw a dart. Photograph the quadrant where it lands, but not with the idea of taking pretty pictures. Frame the image to deepen our understanding of the city as it is.

THE view camera is a cumbersome obstacle perched precariously on top of a three-legged metal sculpture. The scene beyond is projected onto a sheet of glass, where it flickers off and on and upside down, difficult to see without a black cloth to shut out the reflections of bright lights and the honking of drivers calling attention to themselves when confronted with this apparition.

Photographers in the last decade of the nineteenth century could buy manufactured plates, sheets of glass sensitized to record the nuances of light gathered by the lens. Before that time, each photographer was a chemist as well as an explorer and artist and businessman. Film was not store-bought. Film didn't exist. Negatives were made on sheets of glass; the glass was not sensitive to light until the photographer/chemist coated it with silver salts. But the salts were only sensitive to light while wet, so the glass was coated in the portable darkroom only after the scene was chosen and the picture determined. It required development before it dried. Pictures were selected with care; deliberation and physical labor determined the successfully captured scenes.

The methodical approach is difficult to imagine in our moment of iPhone rapture. The ecstasy of rapid-fire shutters and immediate results produces billions of instant gratifications, like

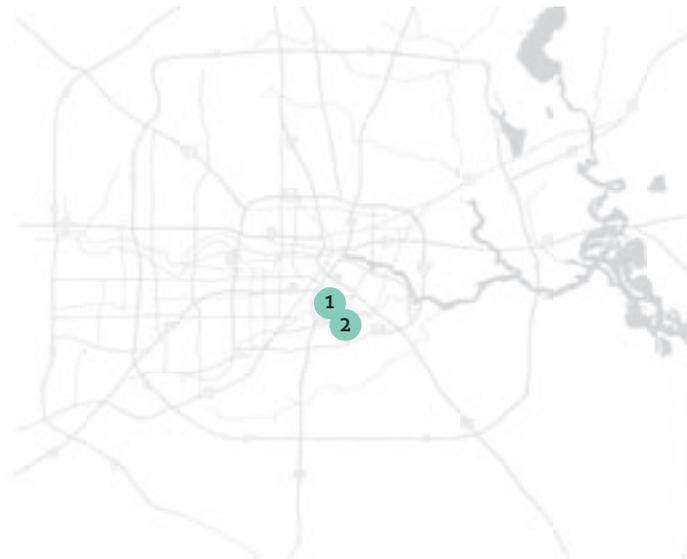
spawning fish flooding the water with an abundance of eggs.

The beginning photography course in the Department of Visual & Dramatic Arts at Rice University combines the technical instruction necessary to expose and develop film with the aesthetic issues that are connected to the historical changes in the processes. One important way of learning about photography is by doing it. Imitating the styles and subject matter of historical moments introduces the conditioning factors of technical events upon aesthetic decisions. The view camera offers a challenge to our cultural moment of digital convenience. The instantaneous record to which we are accustomed is replaced by the delay of several hours required to locate a suitably acceptable place to set up the tripod and camera, measure the light with a hand-held light meter, frame and focus the up-



side-down image vaguely visible on the ground glass at the back of the camera, set the mechanical controls of the aperture and shutter speed, expose the film, return to the darkrooms in the Media Center, develop each sheet of four-inch-by-five-inch film in open trays in complete darkness, wait for the film to dry, and then produce a black-and-white version of the half-remembered and misunderstood upside-down vision briefly glimpsed under the black cloth.

This has been the trial by fire ritual of initiation for beginning photography students at Rice for the past 45 years. Geoff Winningham



1

OLD SPANISH TRAIL AND TIERWESTER

Woman at Southeast Transit Center.
Photograph by Andrew Stegner.

2

OLD SPANISH TRAIL AND TIERWESTER

Mural by Daniel Anguilu. Photograph by
Andrew Stegner.



essay until one sticks. Some consider themselves professional and make a show of announcing their chosen target; others are shy about their lack of this particular skill. Several throw wide of the map and the darts carom toward the fringes of Harris County where nothing is printed on the map to offer any clues of what they might find. There might as well be dragons and sea monsters drawn from ancient seafaring charts. It is all unfamiliar to these inhabitants cloistered within the hedges.

Certain guidelines are emphasized. Do not go alone; make sure your phone battery is charged; if you feel threatened, leave; if a resident is rude or defensive, it is not a reason for you to treat them disrespectfully. Do not trespass; always ask permission; remember that you are invading their territory; consider your privileged status as a representative from an expensive private university; think how it might feel if strangers entered your college domain with these unusual instruments.

Some students restrict their photography to street scenes, commercial structures, parks, and public spaces. Others return with engaged portraits brought forth from genuine social interactions. Some international students are surprised by open ditches and dilapidated shacks and eroding infrastructure. Others seek comfort in the familiarity of suburban house forms. Many discover a different Houston in the interstitial fauna between the glass towers and away from the freeways. The ability of the view cameras to focus very closely on minute details allows the option to ignore the apparent chaos and delineate clarity in peeling paint and the shapes within graffiti. The view on the ground glass is upside-down for a reason; our expectations are inverted. Other Houstons are glimpsed. These students are intellectually curious and visually sophisticated. What do they see in Houston that escapes our tired and habitual eyes? What do you see through their view cameras? 

ALWAYS ASK PERMISSION; REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE INVADING THEIR TERRITORY...

introduced this approach, which he learned at the Institute of Design in Chicago earning an MFA under Aaron Siskind and Arthur Siegel. It was begun in Houston at the University of St. Thomas and continued when the Menil-sponsored program transferred to Rice.

This spring semester is the final beginning course to use the view cameras to introduce students to photography. In the fall of 2013, beginning students will have the option of using 120mm roll film in Holga cameras or go completely digital.

The era of exploration in photography coincided with the geological surveys conducted by the United States government in the Western Territories following the end of the Civil War. Photographers who had learned the trade copying maps, documenting constructions, making portraits, and describing the aftermath of battles headed west to document the wealth and geology and vastness. The assignment in the beginning class forces students to explore parts of the city into which they would not venture on their own. In the beginning, ten years ago, they could only rely on the two dimensions of Key Maps and printouts of the creased and folded Houston street map. Recent classes have turned to Google Maps and Street Views in attempts to predict whether or not a neighborhood is sketchy. Occasionally a student in the class is from Houston and passes along their prejudices about different parts of town. My response to those students is that you don't know the area until you go there, get out of the car, and walk the block. Racial and economic biases are no excuse to avoid uncertainty or the unknown.

A map of Houston is pushpinned to the wall of the classroom, the tack space normally reserved for critiques of their own black-and-white prints. Each student has as many throws as nec-

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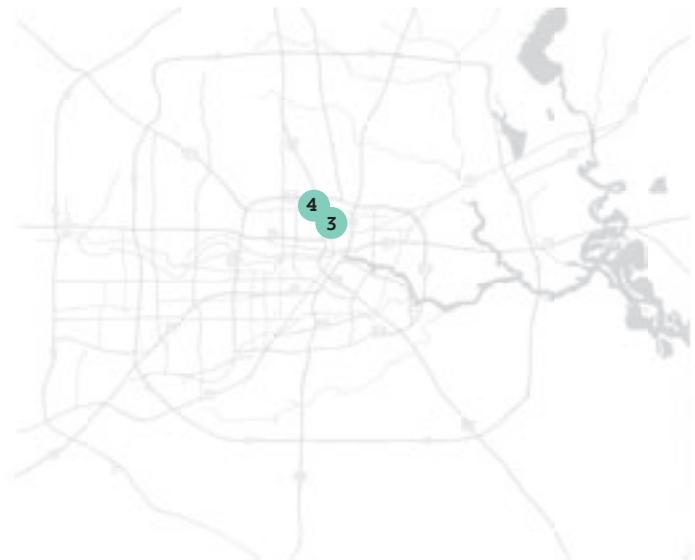


stone

CREATIVE FLOORING

■ RESOURCES ■





3

CAVALCADE AND FULTON

Light rail construction at night. Photo by Reed Jones.

4

CAVALCADE AND FULTON

Dancing mailbox with googly eyes. Photo by Reed Jones.







5

DURBAN AND CLAY

Opposite: Three boys at a garage sale.
Photo by Melissa Fwu.

6

CLINTON AND GREGG

Top Left: Urban Lofts townhouses designed
by Larry Davis. Photo by Yoko Hongyui Li.

7

SHEPHERD AND WROXTON

Top Right: Rippling sidewalk under zoohe-
mic canopy. Photo by Jen Woelfel using
digital camera.

8

AIRPORT AND LINNET

Middle Left: Mailbox with angled pipe sup-
ports. Photo by Nicole Orchard.

9

ADDICKS RESERVOIR AT KATY FREEWAY

Middle Right: A dirt road. Photo by Ve-
ronica Burkel.

10

CHESTNUT AND QUITMAN

Bottom: Two boys and a shopping cart. Pho-
to by Caitlin Rexses using digital camera.
