

The Curator

Harold Block was a curator of the most curious sort. He wasn't a people person and had no desire to pontificate about his shows. He rather enjoyed writing catalogs, but he loathed giving gallery lectures. But he had no choice in the matter. All exhibitions had to have an educational component, particularly in a small museum at a second-tier university.

The curator knew why he chose each piece that went into an exhibition, but often he found it difficult to explain his selections to others. It was always easier when there was a significant historical context to an item. People seemed to take history as an unassailable indicator of value. Why of course it's in the show; it's historical! In past-obsessed South Carolina face jugs were always welcome, as were drippy watercolors and daguerreotypes of ancestral types.

He wrote brochures and descriptive placards. Sometimes catalogs were needed for larger shows curated in-house. He loved the research, the contemplation, the physical gallery time. His staff painted the walls a new color with each show. Then they spent days placing hangers, cleaning vitrines and positioning stanchions. He enjoyed all the physical effort required to present a show, the careful displaying of each work of art. But then he had to face the public.

While the curator hated giving gallery talks, what he dreaded most were opening night receptions. At these events his suit seemed tighter than usual on his ample frame; his tie throttled his breathing. Sometimes he sneaked away to his office where he sipped the caterer's wine and listened to the hum of conversation overhead. More often he ended up in the men's room where he splashed water on his flushed face and combed the remaining strands of his hair back into place with damp fingers.

The museum director usually rapped on the door to check on him when he had gone missing too long.

"Harold?" she would call through the frosted glass. "Are you okay in there?" Eventually, he had no choice but to return to the party.

The curator hated fielding questions from people as they chewed their mini-quiche and blanched vegetables. He went out of his way to dodge the rich, entitled patrons who droned on about the art they saw on their last trip abroad. Even worse were the poorly educated ones who babbled on about objects they knew nothing about. Then there were the older patrons who yelled and spoke so slowly that Harold felt compelled to finish their



sentences. At least the younger crowd left him alone; they came only for the free brie and booze.

The curator was always relieved when opening nights were over and he could fade back into the recesses of the stacks and racks that held the collection. Those days he was happiest alone with his beloved objects.

It was on such a contemplative afternoon in the dead of winter, when the light died early and cold crept into his basement office that the oddest thing happened. He had propped a collection of small historic photographs along the walls around his office. He'd studied each with a photography loop looking for details that the casual gallery visitor might miss. He needed a singular idea useful for connecting the images that would supply a theme for the show.

The photographs had been donated to the museum from the estate of a wealthy alumna who had died at the astounding age of 106. The volume of the woman's collection had been overwhelming. It had taken the curator nearly three months to pull a core group of images that he could arrange into a coherent exhibition. And still there were dozens of boxes that he hadn't the time, nor the inclination, to open.

The museum's director had been most specific in her direction when the curator had told her that there was absolutely nothing remarkable about the collection of old photos. She had assured him that if he looked hard enough that he would indeed find the quality he sought; he had only to keep in mind the \$200,000 the museum would receive from the estate once the exhibition was up. Money was often the real theme behind exhibitions in a struggling museum.

The images were grainy and sepia. The curator turned each curl of thick photo paper over to read faded penciled notes scrawled in a florid hand. Most of the batch he had been examining that day were circa 1935-45. One in particular, an image of three white swans floating on a pond, had caught his attention. It was unusual for amateur photographers to try their hand at landscapes, but this lady had been ahead of her time.

Beulah Manning had photographed the usual people and houses and cars, but she had also had an eye for the lone slave descendent framed in the doorway of a ramshackle hut at the marshy edges of the sea. She'd captured abandoned boats, low-slung and weathered in the tangled flora of an inland waterway and beach houses that had lost their grandeur and loomed hollow and forlorn. Time had tarnished the familiar and he loved the otherworldly feeling of the photos, how they documented and obscured at the same time. But her images had a touch of melancholy that made him uneasy.

The swans were the only animals he'd discovered in the collection. Slightly fuzzy, obviously on the move when the shutter engaged, they were distant in the frame. A spit of land extended into the pond and at one point



the curator thought he saw a person there where the camera had caught the memory of movement. But on inspection with a loop he found no ghostly outline, no streaks to indicate a person out of time with shutter speed.

He scanned the framed images and again felt drawn to the swans. Had he missed something? Was that a face he saw peeking from the depths of the tree cover? He picked up the piece and studied it. Maybe, just maybe there was a face. He laid it flat on his desk, focused light and ran his loop over the background of the image.

All he saw were shadows. He moved the loop around the photo slowly bringing different sections out in bulging detail. He could have sworn that there had been a face. Before he had thought it was the form of someone standing near the water's edge. This time it was a face. He knew it had been there, watching. Was that somebody watching the swans or the photographer?

A tremor of trepidation tickled his spine and he pushed the photo away.

He had the horrible feeling that perhaps he was the one being watched. He grabbed the framed image and set it back on the floor. This time he turned it to the wall.

Over the next week, the curator oversaw the installation of the historic photograph collection. He had titled the show, "Visual Language of the Lowcountry: From the Collection of Miss Beulah Manning, 1927-1955." The show included nearly a hundred images. He'd chosen to hang the swans in a corner he rarely had reason to pass. It wasn't next to the bathrooms and certainly not where he would see it on his way to his office. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling of being observed.

The opening night reception was more gray than usual. There were plenty of canes and walkers. One ancient matron in a wheelchair oddly resembled the photo of Beulah Manning that accompanied the biography panel at the gallery's entrance. She was elegantly dressed with a precious antique cameo at her throat. Another woman, who was herself in her seventies and also well appointed and bejeweled, maneuvered the wheelchair through the crowd. They were coming toward him. The museum director hovered around them.

"Harold," the director said. "I'd like you to meet Mrs. Betty Pinckney. She's Mrs. Manning's sister. And this is her niece, Ann."

The older woman extended her hand, but was unable to raise her gaze to meet the curator's eyes. She turned her head to the side and indicated that she was ready to listen by tapping her ear.

"It's so nice to see you," the curator said. "Mrs. Pinckney, what do you think of the exhibition?"



“She can’t answer you,” her niece said. “She’s about stone deaf and dementia has finally gotten a hold on her. Don’t worry about trying to carry on a conversation. And you can call her Miss Betty. Everybody does.”

This candor stunned the curator, but he was grateful not to have to make small talk.

The old woman pointed and their gaze followed.

“She wants to look at some of the pictures,” the niece said. “But they’re so high on the wall. Can you take one down so she can see?”

It was unorthodox to remove a piece from the wall, particularly during an opening, but the director nodded.

The curator shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

The niece followed as he made his way through the crowd to an image of three people in front of a shiny new Packard. He thought an image of people might be likely to elicit a response if anyone touched the old woman’s memory. He bent down and placed the frame in her lap. She focused and then quickly waved the offering away.

“No,” Miss Betty said distinctly.

The niece shrugged. “Try another?”

“I thought perhaps seeing people she might recognize would appeal.”

“You never know what is going to get her attention. She likes animals. You have anything with animals?”

“Not much. Just one with a few swans in the background, but they’re small and faded. I doubt she could see them.”

“It’s worth a try.”

The curator removed the picture of the swans and offered it for inspection.

It took a moment for her to focus. Suddenly, with hands like talons she grasped the image and pulled it close.

“There they are,” she said. “There!” She tapped the glass with a skeletal finger.

“Who Aunt Betty? Who’re you talking about? There’s nobody in that photo.”

“There!” she insisted. “There they are. There!”

The niece looked at the curator with a quizzical expression. “She thinks she sees something, I guess.”

“Miss Betty,” the curator said. “What do you see?”

“They’re there. Right there.”

“Who? Who’s there?”

“Don’t worry about it,” the niece said. “She’s probably just having a moment. She comes and goes.”

It was likely that the woman’s reaction was only fantasy, but perhaps, like him, she saw something no one else could see.



“There was no identification on the back of this image,” he said to the niece. “Do you know where this pond is located?”

“I can’t be completely sure, but it could be the one on our family farm.”

“How nice. A family farm. Does your family still own it?”

“A cousin does. I mean if that actually is the same place. You know a waterline can change over the years. We weren’t allowed to play there when we were young. My grandmother was afraid we’d drown. If it is our pond it dried up years ago. My great-uncle filled it in the rest of the way. He was afraid it would breed mosquitoes.”

After the caterers had cleared out and all the doors were locked, the curator made his way back to his office, the presence of the strange photo pressing on him. He sipped a glass of wine and contemplated the holdings room where the rest of the Manning photograph collection lived. The family would come to collect the lot in a few weeks when the exhibition came down.

His hunch was baseless, but something told him that he had to keep looking. Maybe he would unearth a clue that would prove the old woman was recalling something specific. Perhaps he would find another image at the pond where there was a wonderful family picnic on a sunny day. It would be his good deed to give her a snapshot of a long-ago afternoon with family when she was young. Perhaps it would spur the family to a larger donation.

He would do it fast. He didn’t have days to waste this time. He didn’t bother with the white curatorial gloves. Nobody would know. Nobody would care.

He took the first box of photos to the light table and began to sift through them. There were bundles and bundles of photos bound with dry rubber bands that crumbled at his touch. They were all in the same vain—people, houses, cars, cotton fields and shrimping boats. Most of the people were serious, unsmiling, dour even. Only the children had an untroubled look about them.

Sometime around four in the morning, with his neck aching and his eyes stinging he hauled the last carton of photos to the table. Certain that his search had been futile, he upturned the contents and from the bottom tumbled a cigar box. An exotic Cuban woman on the golden label smiled at him. The box was bound by unbroken tape. He took an artist’s knife and sawed his way through the yellowed binding.

The top cracked and fell away from the box when he opened it. Inside were more photographs, all turned facedown. He gingerly slid them into his hand, turned them upright and caught his breath.

Dead babies. Newborns, although a couple were likely a few months old. He fanned them apart on the table, a dozen in all, but there were two and three angles of each child. Their tiny eyes were closed. None were dressed in



the usual funeral finery of the time, no white lace or baby bonnets. These postmortem children were either nude or wrapped in blankets. None were in bassinets or miniature caskets.

Their faces were distorted and large, their limbs foreshortened and twisted. The curator wondered if they had downs syndrome or dwarfism or something much worse. One's mouth was open as if it had died mid-scream. There were no adults in the photos, no grieving mothers holding their wasted prizes. The images were cold, documentation only. He flipped each one over looking for any type of description. There was nothing. No date. No location. No name.

Had Beulah Manning taken these? Had she been called to the homes of her neighbors to document the stillborn and young dead of bereaved parents? Had this been a hobby or a profession for which she was paid?

The curator was suddenly exhausted and so terribly sad for the pallid, limp children in his hands. He suspected they weren't just memories hidden away in a box. They were a secret.

There was a time when death was closer to home. When people laid their dead in the parlor and neighbors came to pay their respect. Often photographers were called in to take images that were kept as mementos and sent to relatives who could not attend the ceremony. But these images of abnormal dead infants were beyond the customs of those days.

The curator was no stranger to historical photographs of open caskets and propped up corpses. An idea for an exhibition came to him. People were always interested in the macabre. That would be a show he could sell. He would have to create a separate room for these particular shots with signs that warned people of their disturbing nature, but no doubt attendance would pick up.

He would have to do research. Find out if birth certificates were issued. He knew where to start. He would begin with Miss Betty. Her niece said her focus waned, but at times she had clarity of thought. Without her, he could flounder for weeks looking for answers. If only she would awaken from old age long enough to point him in the right direction.

The curator arrived at the assisted living facility while breakfast was being cleared. The old woman's niece had said he was welcome to visit her aunt, but she hadn't offered to meet him. He had been vague when he spoke of finding other photos that her aunt might recognize.

A nurse in pink scrubs showed him to the room. It was a nicely appointed private room with hardwood floors and brass doorknobs. The old woman was near the window in her rolling chair. She was backlit against the sunlight outside and a corona of wispy colorless hair glowed around her face.



She watched a small bird in a tree outside. A sound machine pumped a rumble of ocean waves into the room.

"She like that ocean thing," the nurse said. "Reminds her of growing up at the beach."

"If I'd known I would have brought her some shells," the curator said.

The nurse shrugged. "She might come to. You can give it a try. Just yank that cord if you need me." And she was gone.

He positioned a chair close to the window too.

"Miss Betty?" he said. No response.

He tried a little louder. "Miss Betty, do you remember me? I'm Harold Block, the curator from the museum yesterday."

It took a moment for her to realize someone had called her name. She touched her hearing aid to make sure it was working, then she turned toward him and her eyes opened wide. She reached forward and laid a hand against his cheek. A look of love came over her and he realized that she must think him someone else.

He pulled the picture of the swans from his satchel. He had left a note when he took the photo from the museum so his staff wouldn't panic when it came up missing. He placed it on her lap. Again, she took a moment to focus. She ran her fingers over the glass.

"Miss Betty, is this your home?"

Her eyes played across the image.

"Is that your pond? Did your family swim here? Did you have a picnic?"

Her gaze fell to the window and then returned to the image.

"There they are," she said. A soft smile played across her face.

"Who Miss Betty? Your family? Your sister, Miss Beulah?"

She drifted off again and he realized that he wasn't going to get much more information than he had the night before. No need to prolong the situation.

From the depths of his satchel he pulled the cigar box. She reached forward to take it as if she expected it to be a present. He hesitated. Seeing all the images at once had startled him. Perhaps he needed to reveal them slowly for her.

"Here, I'll show you," he said. "Have you seen this photo before?" He held an image forward, one that wasn't quite as grotesque as some.

Her eyes went wide. A moan started low in her throat and came crawling up out of her. She slapped a wrinkled hand over her mouth and suppressed a sob. Her bloodshot eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Miss Betty. I'll put it away. I didn't mean to upset you."



"No." She put out her hand and he gently laid the photo in her palm. As she studied the contorted baby, tears pooled in her eyes and spilled onto her hollow cheeks.

"So many babies," she whispered.

"Do you know this baby?"

She didn't reply.

"What about this one?" He held up another photo for her to see.

She reached for them all and tears flowed.

"You know them?"

Her voice was suddenly dreamy and childlike.

"Grandfather baptized them . . . in the pond."

"He was a preacher?"

She shook her head. No.

"Who are these children?"

She looked directly at him. "Why, they're our babies, of course."

"Whose?"

"Our house girl's. Our maid's girl, Mandy. She was simple. All those babies, Grandfather said they were simple, too."

Someone wailed in the hall, a low, mournful sound. The curator jumped and goose flesh crawled his arms. He cleared a nervous rattle from his throat.

"Why would your sister take these photos?"

"She didn't. Momma did. Momma took them. She said to remember. She said . . . she said so Grandfather would leave us alone."

"Leave who alone?"

"Us girls."

"You and your sisters, Beulah?"

She nodded.

Did it work? the curator wondered. She had said, "Our babies." Had their mother been successful in sacrificing the maid's daughter in order to save her own? Had time changed the story in the old woman's mind? Or was this selective memory at play?

"Miss Betty, what happened to the babies?"

"God took them."

"I know, but what happened to their little bodies?"

She pointed to the framed image on the floor.

"There they are."

Realization washed him.

"They're in the water," he said.

She leaned forward and motioned for him to come near. He bent close to her.



“They waited,” she whispered, her breath warm in his ear. “They waited to be buried. Momma wanted to bury them, but Grandfather said no. So, they waited.”

And they watched from the depths of their murky grave, he thought. They waited and they watched.

“Is that why your uncle filled in the pond?” he asked, but the old woman’s mind had turned away from him.

Her attention shifted to the sunny window where her rheumy eyes followed a wren flitting from branch to branch in a winter-barren tree. The bird’s beak opened and its throat flared in song, but its sweet sound was drowned in a crash of ocean waves.

~Janna McMahan

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