



from *Aftermath* by Bruce Barnbaum



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Commentary

To paraphrase the old quote, “Abstracts: can’t live with them, can’t live without them.” Unless, that is, you are a member of the general public in which case there is no doubt you *can* live without them and probably do. As someone who loves abstract photography, it pains me to admit this, but *no one likes abstracts* and they are impossible to sell. No one. Okay, I may be speaking emotionally here.

Bruce Barnbaum is one of the best fine art photographers of his generation. He’s primarily known for his wonderful landscapes and for his pioneering work in the slit canyons of Arizona. (His slit canyon work may be one of the few exceptions to my statements above about no one liking abstract photography.) This abstract image is from an unusual body of work of his whose subject was the remnants of a devastating fire in the Santa Monica Mountains of Southern California. This image is one of ten that were included in his clamshell-boxed portfolio titled *Aftermath*.

This is an engaging abstract, but speaking frankly, who would want a photograph consisting of some charred remains from a tin roof above their fireplace?

This illustrates one of the great problems of abstract photography — it doesn’t fit very comfortably within the concept that defines most photography that sells — *decor*. On so many levels, this is a terrific

photograph — compositionally, tonally, with fluidity, movement, and even drama. But it is not decor.

I first saw Barnbaum’s portfolio in a workshop I attended in 1983. This image in particular captivated me. I loved everything about it from a photographic point of view. Seeing this beautiful gelatin silver print up close and at leisure convinced me even more that I wanted to do abstract photography. But the more I thought about *why*, the more I was confronted with the simple reality: the primary home for abstract photography is either a book or a portfolio — neither of which I was likely to produce. It’s as though abstracts come with their own built in disincentive. But then again ...

If, like me, you love abstract photography, then by all means do it. Please do not let public indifference dissuade you. The time I spent viewing this image from Barnbaum in 1983 convinced me: Even if a photograph connects deeply with only a few individuals — or perhaps even *one* — it is still worth doing. Photography is about human connection, and that is something of value be it a connection with one or with the masses. Art is not a thing of volume, but rather of depth. By that measure, abstracts do succeed in a way that pretty sunsets and dewy spiderwebs may not.