

from *Impermanence of Knowledge*

by Gregory Davis



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #127

Commentary

We photographers like to think that we are visual people and that our artwork is visual—perhaps even *strictly* visual. I've always thought this assumption is completely mistaken because behind every photograph there is an intellectual concept that informs the image and/or influences how we interpret it. I've often mentioned the great Dorothea Lange image *Migrant Mother* and how different our interpretation of it would be if it were titled *The Return of the Soldier*. In both of these examples, the content of the visual photograph is significantly influenced by the conceptual context in which we see it. The visual content doesn't change, but our *interpretation* of it changes dramatically.

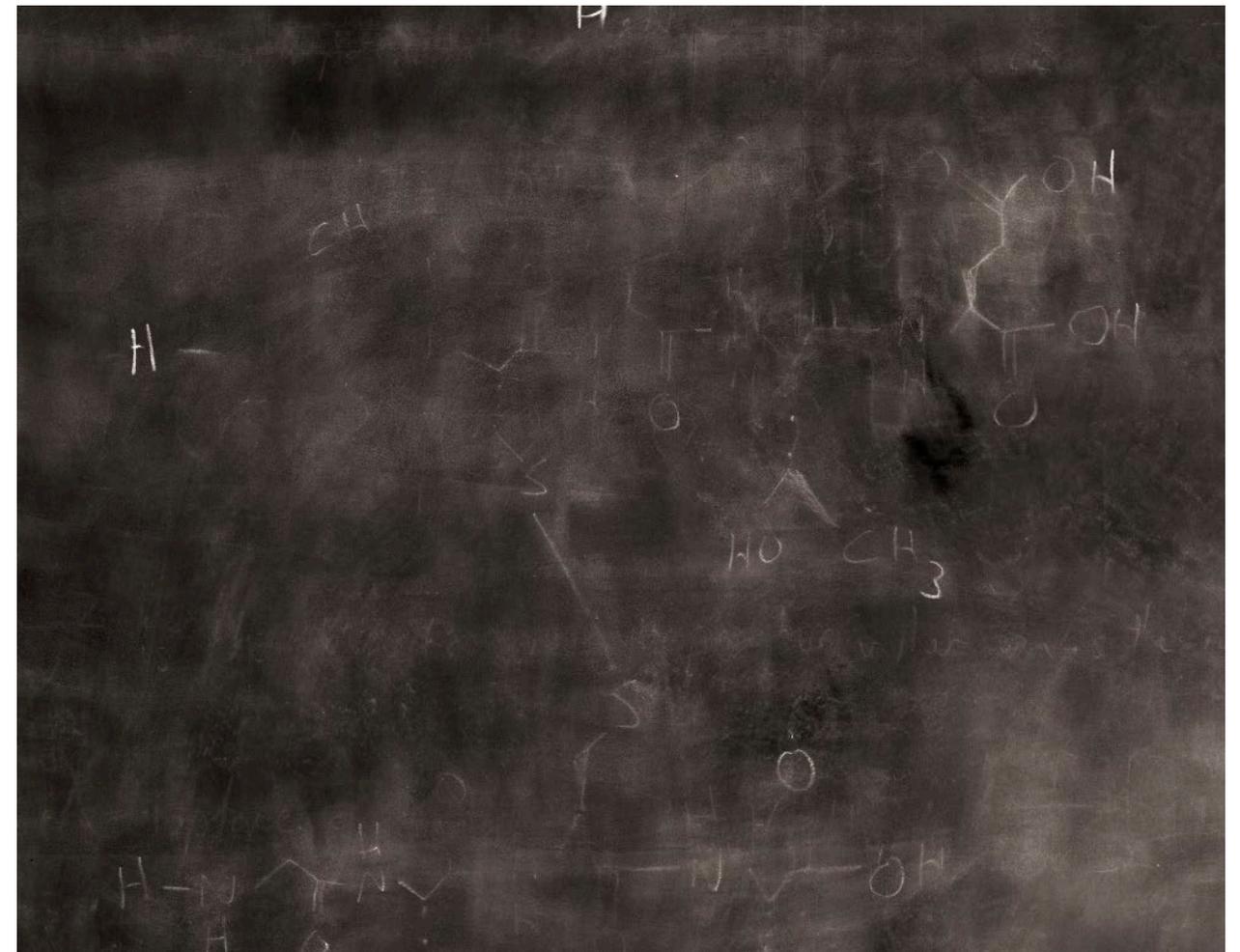
Said another way, we might like to fool ourselves into thinking that photography is strictly visual, but there exists an undeniable and unavoidable link between whatever we *see* and what we *think* about what we see.

Of course, what we think may not be what the photographer intended, but I have always thought the best photography communicates precisely what the photographer intended, rather than to leave it to chance and possible misinterpretation. In the recent decades it has become fashionable to promote the idea that artwork is open to be interpreted however the viewer wants. I can see how that argument might make sense with abstracts, but in most artwork it seems more like a cop-out for bad art, poorly conceived or poorly executed. Worse, it flies

in the face of 5,000 years of art history. I simply can't bring myself to believe that Michelangelo would be comfortable if we interpreted his Sistine Chapel paintings in any way we wanted. I suspect, ahem, that he had a very particular point of view he was expressing with every brush stroke.

Gregory Davis tells us exactly what the intellectual concept is behind this project by three simple words in the title—*impermanence of knowledge*. His project then illustrates how that concept is played out with all kinds of knowledge. In the example shown here, it's scientific knowledge, specifically chemical formulæ. Other images in his project demonstrate the same idea with musical notation, poetry, mathematics, etc. He is not wishy-washy about what he wants us to think as we view these pictures, and that brings both power and clarity to his project.

In fact, the marriage of concept and images in this project might seem almost simplistic. It is not. This is always the case when artwork is brilliantly executed. We are left with the feeling that the work is obvious and even perfectly predictable. In truth, that feeling is a measurement of how well the artwork has been conceived and produced. The proof of this exists in one simple question: how many of us have seen partially erased blackboards and conceived



them as an art project, let alone an art project with this particular contextual spin? Perhaps it's been done before, but in my 40 years in photography I've never seen anything like it. Having seen it now in Davis' project, however, my reaction is, "Of course! It's so obvious!" Except for the fact that it isn't until Gregory Davis showed it to us.

It's also worth looking at his entire project and thinking about the compositions he employs. Obvi-

ously, the written material he photographs was not intended to make balanced artistic compositions in a visual media. Nonetheless, that was his challenge in creating these photographs. He does so with each image and I suspect this took some doing on his part to find the exact position for the frame of his images so that the randomly placed characters would make a visual balance. Or is that the nature of writing itself? Hmmm ...