

Here Today

by Jenny Ellerbe



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Commentary

I've always found it particularly rewarding when a photograph sneaks up on us. This is becoming a more unusual experience here in the age of the Internet and the quick click. I would love to know accurate statistics about how much time is spent looking at each photograph we see on the Internet. I assume it's measurable, but I also assume it would measure in some *fraction* of a second.

Compare that to Minor White's advice that you haven't seen a photograph until you've looked at it for 30 minutes. What could he possibly mean by that, and could it be true? We might debate over the number of minutes White suggests, but there is no question that in order to *see* a photograph requires time—and more time than the average person spends in a glance.

Consider this unassuming photograph by Jenny Ellerbe. At first glance we see the door, the empty chairs, the shelves of merchandise, and perhaps even the Winston push sign—the origin of her title for this photograph. But did you notice—at first glance—the ghosted view of the rocking chair at the right? It appears almost to move, an illusion that is created entirely by reflections in the door window. This rocking chair contains the essence of this project—a disappearing part of Americana that is, as yet, still “here today.”

The illusory movement of that rocking chair plays against all the other empty chairs in the scene to

create a sense of melancholy and nostalgia for something temporally just beyond our vision. There is a sense that just a moment ago, there were people who have vanished. That assumption is reinforced by the florescent lights, still on, telling us this is not some abandoned location, but nonetheless one on the edge of abandonment. *That* is the true subject and importance of this photograph—and the essence of Ellerbe's project. How easy it would be to miss this interpretation and thereby completely miss what Ellerbe is showing us, particularly if we dismissed such an unassuming photograph with a quick glance and a hair-trigger click.

Not every photograph is worth 30 minutes of our attention, but I could make a strong argument that *every* photograph that survives the editing process to appear in a portfolio of finished work is deserving of at least more than an instantaneous glance. We will be rewarded if we take the time to scan the photograph in detail, ask ourselves what this photograph is about, what is the photographer trying to say, and how does it make us feel? Why is this image included in the final project? What did the photographer see? Too much of photography emphasizes the crescendo image. I often find there is much more to experience and learn from images like this that are less showy and more substantive.

