

From Earth, From Heaven

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Commentary

What is it that we ask a photograph to do? In an overall and generic sense, how do we define a successful photograph? Well, for a snapshot we ask the photograph to connect us with a memory, or a loved one. With documentary and journalism photography, we asked the photograph to connect us to a time and place. But with fine art photography, what is it that we ask a photograph to do?

I think this is a more complex question than appears at first glance, but one answer—perhaps even the most important answer—is that a fine art photograph needs to connect us with an emotion and/or perhaps an idea. This is a tall order, particularly because most fine art photographs are pictures of inanimate things—landscapes, still life, urban-scapes, exotic locations and people, botanical subjects—and this list just scratches the surface.

Notice that all of these things are just as emotionally neutral as is the marble used to create this funerary statue photographed by Marco Marocco. Nonetheless, this is not just *any* hunk of marble; it is a statue that itself is filled with emotion—which transfers to us as we view it. Or is this backwards? More accurately, isn't it *our* emotion that transfers to the inanimate marble? Long ago it became disreputable to attribute anthropomorphic emotions to animals and inanimate objects, but that is precisely the challenge of art making. Art without the ability to receive our transfer of emotion (which we interpret as emotion *received*) is art that “leaves us cold.”

Most of you reading this have probably photographed a tree from time to time. But did you photograph just any old tree? Or did you select, out of all the possible trees you come across in your life, some *specific* trees to photograph that captured your imagination? What is it about the specific trees you did photograph that made *them* worthy, when all the other ones were not? Perhaps it was that they were more capable of receiving our anthropomorphic emotional projection. We say the tree we photographed looked forlorn, or exhibited youthful springtime exuberance, or was an archetypal example of nature in its most pristine. But, of course, all of these are merely projections of our human concepts onto the inanimate tree.

Without the ability to project emotion onto inanimate objects, the object's ability to contribute to our artwork is diminished. Perhaps knowing this allows us to think of it as a *strategy* for selecting what we photograph and what we pass by.

In this example, note the layers of dust and dirt that have accumulated over the decades adding even more emotional content beyond just the statue itself. Just a little dust and dirt, but wouldn't you agree that this inanimate detritus adds to the emotional effect?