



Pixie Plates

by Mark Sawyer



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Commentary

I can't help but assume that Edward Weston, up there in that great darkroom in the sky, is chuckling at this image as much as we are. There is no question that Mark Sawyer is having fun with a bit of an inside joke — but what a fun inside joke it is! I wouldn't be surprised if Sawyer titled this image *Pepper #30, with Pixie*, but I can't attest to that. It's such a joy to see a photographer acknowledge the great masters that have come before us, but not by merely duplicate their image as an “homage” — or worse, a direct ripoff. Sawyer clearly *acknowledges* the history of photography but takes it one step further by being playful with it, and that I find not only refreshing, but downright humorous.

And speaking of playful, this entire portfolio exhibits a playfulness I've rarely seen in my four decades in photography. Perhaps it's the pixie herself that is so playful, or perhaps it's the playfulness with which Sawyer chose to employ the small figurines. The resulting portfolio is a collection of images that each invite us into a tableau, a photographic diorama where the pixie figure finds herself in a variety of situations. It's not unlike watching Lucy Ricardo try to disentangle herself from some shenanigans. The pixie is mischievous, curious, puzzled, meditative, frustrated, and even mad — an in each case, we are right there along with her. This is a marvelous accomplishment.

Let me be blunt: when was the last time you looked at a photographic portfolio and found *each*

photograph exhibiting and or connecting with a different emotion, without exception? That Mark Sawyer does this successfully with over 100 images in this project is a testament to his creativity and the rich potential of his project concept.

That last comment is worth thinking about a bit more. In my experience, every project is founded in some conceptual structure that gives the project shape and form — in this example, the pixie exploring her world. The key is developing a project structure that offers rich potential. Imagine, just as a thought experiment, this project without the pixie and *only* with peppers. 100 photographs of peppers would quickly become boring. Still life photographs of a single pepper (or other vegetable) is a conceptual structure that may work well for one photograph or maybe a few, but it quickly wears thin. Sawyer's structure allows him almost unlimited exploration using these figurines to explore the full range of human emotions.

Developing a pliable, productive, and flexible structure is one of the first important steps to developing a successful project. Too loose, and it fails to hold together as a project; too tight and it exhausts itself after only a few images. The right project structure makes our creative task a great deal easier.