

# DATEBOOK



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Deceptively simple but spooky photos open a window into the heart of American alienation

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CHRONICLE ART CRITIC

Henry Wessel's photographs look like nothing much at first. But stay with them and they emanate little revelations of their time and of the nature of photography.

Consider a black-and-white picture titled "Pasadena, California" (1974). Here two leggy baton twirlers dressed in white stand in the street, as if marching in place for a moment during a parade. One stretches her arms overhead, baton in hand. The flamelike foliage of a juniper behind her leads the eye further upward to a helicopter distant in the sky above, its propeller a tiny echo of the upraised baton.

In a coincidence completely un-

## REVIEW

**Henry Wessel: Photographs.** Through April 22. **2006 SECA Art Award: Sarah Cain, Kota Ezawa, Amy Franceschini, Mitzi Pederson, Leslie Shows:** Works in various media. Through April 22. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., San Francisco. (415) 357-4000. [www.sfmoma.org](http://www.sfmoma.org).

**"New Mexico"** (1969), gelatin silver print by Henry Wessel.

related — except that it helps to assert coincidence as this picture's true subject — the long shadow of a palm tree falls across the street from behind Wessel's camera and laps up the spindly trunk of another palm that snakes upward beyond the frame.

In one of Wessel's most familiar pictures, "Santa Barbara" (1977), a man stands on a threadbare lawn and watches as a flock of birds before him scatters in flight. Stare at the picture for a moment and its stasis — that plain, definitive photographic fact — induces a peculiar thought: that Wessel has caught the man in the act of doing by magic what the camera does by nature, freezing the birds' motion for clos-

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er study.

A well-known Bay Area photographer, Wessel began taking pictures while a psychology student at Penn State in the mid-'60s. The San Francisco Museum of Art's survey of his work, which opens today, makes it look like a continuation of psychology by other means.

Probing Wessel's pictures acquaints you more closely with your own curiosity, habits of attention and emotional and cultural affinities. For example, where some viewers will see mere emptiness or artistic laziness in Wessel's pictures of signal-heavy rural intersections barren of traffic, others will find concise images of American alienation.

Some may overlook the noir stirrings in a picture such as "Santa Monica, California" (1989), which shows a barebacked young woman passing three pay phones as she strides around a corner, under slamming sunlight, toward the entrance of a high-rise motel. Others will burn to know what followed.

"Santa Monica, California" contains a characteristic pinprick of found humor: an E has fallen from a sign on the motel's exterior, so that it reads "REASONABLE RATS."

The passage from familiarity to strangeness — or back and forth between the two — seems to fascinate Wessel. A picture titled "New Mexico" (1969) describes a one-story adobe-style house with a perfectly sensible front yard treatment for a climate hostile to lawns: a sparse scattering of rocks and struggling vegetation on barren ground. But viewers who know the comics of George Herriman (1880-1944) will wonder in what spirit the homeowner re-created the Southwest moonscape in which Herriman set the adventures of Crazy Kat.

Some Wessel pictures find psychological metaphor in factual circumstance. In "Nevada" (1975), a natty middle-aged man stands alongside a cottage as well kept as he appears. He stares at a dilapidated neighboring house, on which his shadow falls, just a few feet away. The camera view reveals a wide canyon opening just behind the gap between the buildings. Seemingly without effort, Wessel has formed an image of a man resisting seeing into his own future.

Banality and spookiness trade places frequently in Wessel's work, sometimes in the course of our inspecting a single image.

His Las Vegas series may appear to traffic in easy targets, but it also rewards close study. The big color print "No. 15, From Las Vegas Series" (2002) looks straightforward enough. It shows a schlock landscape painting hanging in the center of a mirrored wall adjoining the elevators at the end of a garish hotel corridor.

Other photographers — Diane Arbus (1923-1971), Lee Friedlander — have shown us the ironies of landscape imagery in windowless wastelands. And Wessel seems merely to do more of the same until it occurs to you to wonder why neither he nor his camera appears reflected in the mirrored wall.

He found just the right stand-



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point — a landscapist's obsession — so that the painting would conceal him. Meanwhile a security camera eyes the corridor from a bubble in the ceiling; the invisible cameraman under surveillance.

Left, "No. 15, From Las Vegas Series" (2002) chromogenic print by Henry Wessel;