

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MAY 21, 2006

PHOTOGRAPHY

By PHILIP GELTER

"MOST musicians I know don't just play music on Saturday night," Henry Wessel explained. "They play music every day. They are always fiddling around, letting the notes lead them from one place to another. Taking still photographs is like that. It is a generative process. It pulls you along."

Mr. Wessel has been pulled along for nearly 40 years. From the moment he landed in Los Angeles in 1969, he wanted to photograph everything in sight. "I walked out of the airport into one of those clear, sharp-edged January days," he said. "The light had such physical presence; it looked as though you could lean against it."

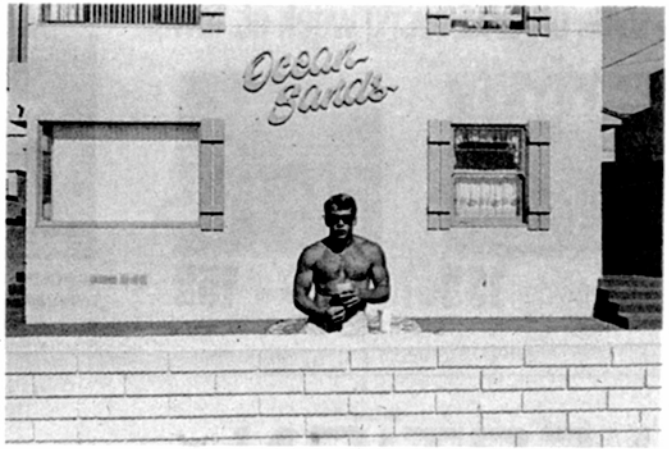
The first of 140 pictures in Mr. Wessel's new boxed set, comprising the slender volumes "California and the West," "Odd Photos," "Las Vegas," "Real Estate Photographs" and "Night Walk" (Steidl), suggests how the photographer allows himself to be led by his eyes. You see a road in an empty desert landscape; a small dot is in the center of the frame; looking closer, your eyes force the letters into focus, coaxed perhaps by the recognizable shape of a stop sign. Just as an eye chart forces your vision to narrow, many of his pictures compel you to take a closer look.

His obdurately spare and often wry black-and-white pictures of vernacular scenes in the American West were first given a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1973. A year later his work was included in "The Snapshot," an influential book published by Aperture that identified an emerging genre in photography of the period. The "snapshot aesthetic" combined the immediacy of family snapshots, the authenticity of documentary images and the increasingly informal style of news pictures, as photographers tried to capture the spontaneity of a moment with heightened descriptive clarity.

"Innocence is the quintessence of the snapshot," Lisette Model wrote in the book's introduction. "I wish to distinguish between innocence and ignorance. Innocence is one of the highest forms of being and ignorance one of the lowest."

Mr. Wessel, who was born in Teaneck, N.J., 64 years ago, aims for that innocence in his work: he wants to narrow the distinction between the subjects he chooses and how they look photographed. (As Garry Winogrand always said, the only reason he himself took pictures was to see what things looked like photographed.)

From the beginning Mr. Wessel has used only one camera, a Leica with a 28-millimeter lens, and one type of film, Tri-X, which allows a full range of tones. He still processes his own film and makes his own black-and-white prints. Limiting his tools to a single camera with the same lens over the years has so deepened Mr. Wessel's sense of how light translates to film, and then to paper, that it's almost instinctive.

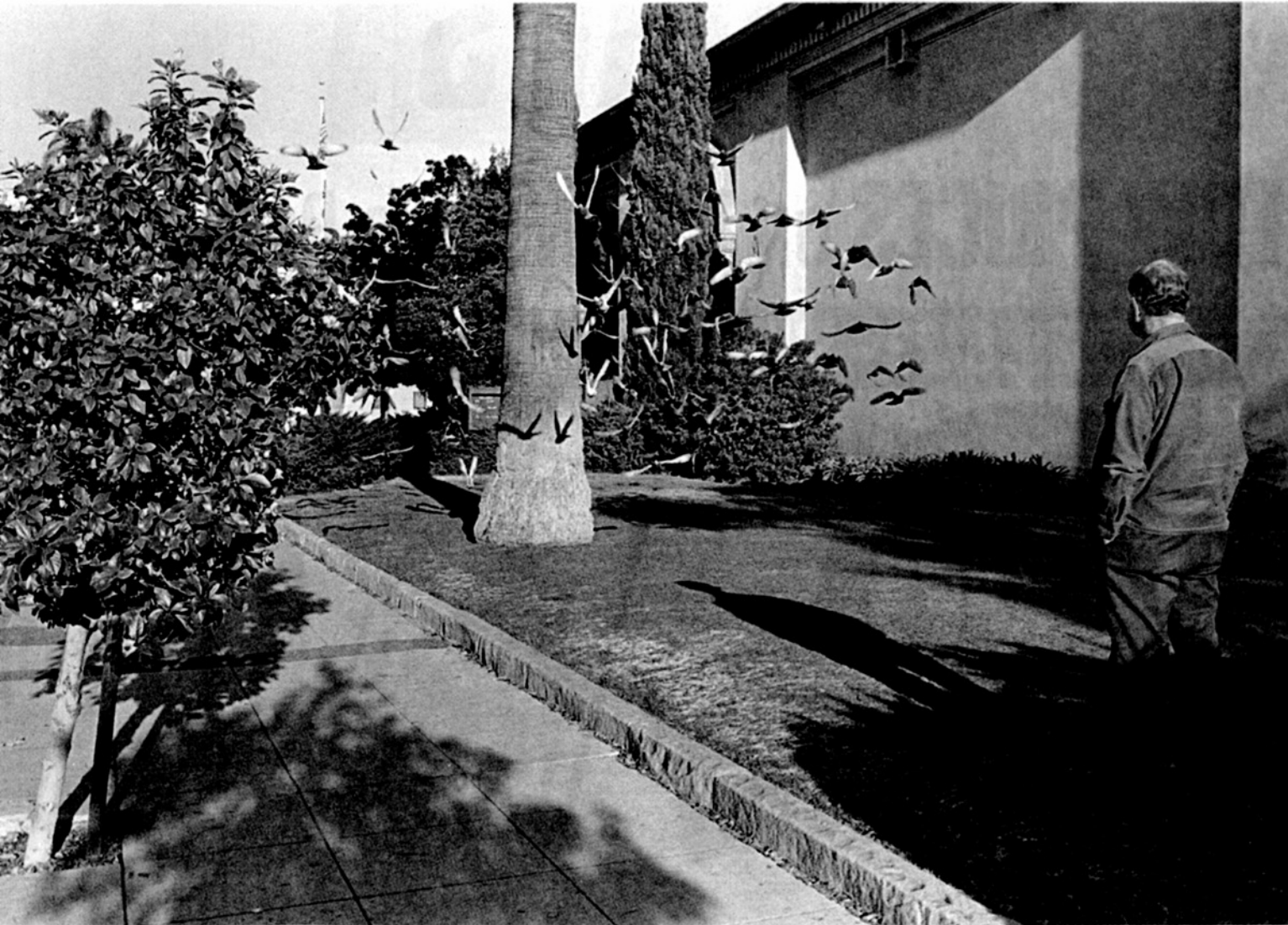


His most important choices are where he stands and when he shoots. But what goes into those decisions is elusive.

"Part of it has to do with the discipline of being actively receptive," he said over lunch recently in Manhattan. "At the core of this receptivity is a process that might be called soft eyes. It is a physical sensation. You are not looking for something. You are open, receptive. At some point you are in front of something that you cannot ignore."

In "Santa Barbara, Calif., 1977," a man stands on a patch of lawn staring at a flock of birds. The birds swirl in flight at eye level. Mr. Wessel took the picture at a bus stop, and said that the axial light of the early-morning sun was what at first attracted him.

"As I approached this scene, the birds were feeding in the grass," he said. "Startled for some reason, they took flight. I instinctually shot, exposing three frames before they were gone. When I look at it now, I marvel at how much of the world is hidden in the flux of time." The picture has the effect of a visual Zen koan, as if the man's gaze were what suspends the birds in flight.



Mr. Wessel suggested that photographs have a close affinity to Imagist poems, a comparison that reflects his own artistic influences. The Imagists wrote laconic verse with hard-edged description, creating precise visual mental images. Mr. Wessel's photographs too have an optical precision and silvery veneer that aim for that mental-image clarity.

"Tucson, Ariz., 1974," his picture of a small bungalow behind towering reeds, was taken while he was stuck in late-morning traffic on a trip from Waco, Tex., to Los Angeles. He was driving a 1959 Chevy Parkwood station wagon and saw a house as he glanced over his shoulder: "When I think back to this event, it serves as a reminder that it can happen anywhere at any time, like William Carlos Williams sitting on a bus, then writing about the back of the woman's head who was sitting in front of him."

In another picture, "Southern California, 1985," a shirtless, well-built beach boy leans against a table, wearing sunglasses in the sunlight. You can see what Mr. Wessel means by the physicality of the California light; it's so sharp that the young man looks like a cutout against the concrete wall. The name on the building behind him, Ocean Sands, leads you to think that he is on the beach, even though there is no water in sight.

"Whenever I am in San Diego, I walk the beachfront neighborhoods, mindless, yet attentive, letting things catch my eye," Mr. Wessel said, adding that the best time of day is during the brilliant afternoon sun before the twilight fog rolls in. "I have no recollection of having taken this picture, but according to the contact sheet I took this photograph and two variants."

One of Mr. Wessel's rules is to put his contact sheets away for a year before deciding which images to print. "If you let some time go by before considering work that you have done, you move toward a more objective position in judging it," he said. "The pleasure of the subjective, physical experience in the world is a more distant memory and less influential."

While not widely known to the public, Mr. Wessel has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute since the early 1970's and has influenced generations of photographers.

"Even in Wessel's early work in the desert and California, the high Western light that fills his pictures seems almost hallucinatory," Tod Papageorge, director of the graduate program in photography at Yale, wrote in an e-mail message. "I think this had a strong influence on photographers who followed him in the later 70's, but none of them attempted to deal with the range of subjects, or made pictures that possess the extreme, and oddly personal level of visual precision that marks all his work."

In an era of digitally scanned, wall-size color images, Mr. Wessel's modest black-and-white prints take on the quality of handmade objects. "People don't pay much attention these days to the descriptive, expressive and suggestive facts found in a good still photograph," he said ruefully, before offering a clue to his motivation. "The process of photographing is a pleasure: eyes open, receptive, sensing, and at some point, connecting. It's thrilling to be outside your mind, your eyes far ahead of your thoughts."