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Sharon Corwin, Jessica May, Terri Weissman. *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xiv + 198 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-26562-2.

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Documenting the Modern: The Photography of Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White

Photography became increasingly popular during the 1920s, among amateurs as well as in the media, but it was marked more by sentimentalism than realism. Pictorialism, soft-focus portraits. and avant-garde images held sway, while documentary photography was marginalized, associated with progressive reform politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and exemplified by the work of photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. But the stock market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression, along with the rise of fascism in Europe, ignited a new vision among young photographers, ushering in a golden age of American documentary photography. Among those photographers were Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, and Margaret Bourke-White, the subjects of *American Modern*. The book is the catalog for an exhibition of the same name cosponsored by the Amon Carter Museum in Forth Worth, Texas, and Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine. It includes an essay about each of the photographers and is richly illustrated with their work from this period. Taken as a whole, the essays provide insight into the unique characteristics of documentary photography in America during the 1930s; they also show how Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White were connected by their influences and methods.

These three photographers recognized "the ferment of social transformation" during the 1930s and set out to capture it on film. They blended their considerable tools as artists with the tactics of mass media "to make sense of that transformation" (p. 6). Documentary photography is defined here as a type of photographic practice that "distinguished itself from earlier ideas of photographic modernism in that it privileged the immediate, the transitory, and the urgent over more traditional ideals of beauty and timelessness" (p. 1). It was a changing of the guard in photography, and the authors argue that the three photographers included here contributed a novel and independent approach to this practice. Abbott recognized that "photography was a means of critical dialogue and communication"; Evans "thoroughly investigated the idea that photography has a unique and essential relationship to time"; and Bourke-White fused "the logic and pageantry of modern industry with drama and individual narratives of its subjects" (p. 2).

Much has been written about all three, including multiple biographies. Each is included in *Icons of Photography* (1999), edited by Peter Stepan, and in many other compilations of great photographers. And they all have their own well-regarded books: Abbott's *Changing New York* (1939); Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, with James Agee (1941); and Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, with Erskine Caldwell (1937). *American Modern* takes a different approach in that, as the exhibition's Web site states, it is a "scholarly catalogue."[1]. It includes biographical material about each of the photographers, especially from the late 1920s and the 1930s, but is just as much a work of art and social criticism. For someone most interested in media and photo history, as is this reviewer, the text can be somewhat dense and arcane. For example, Terri Weissman, author of the essay on Abbott, describes two of Abbott's images of the massive excavation done to make way for Rockefeller Center in New York City. The photos show massive rocks, ladders, and girders. They are landscape photos while at the same time being historical documents. But they become much more in Weissman's writing: "Rockefeller Center's exca-

vation pit becomes a ruin disguised as a construction: it hints at all that we do not know or understand about the processes of development and decay, expansion and destruction, articulation and miscommunication. History is sealed within the image–Abbott captures a moment or a manifestation of cultural transformation–but it is a history that makes incomplete sense, a history whose end remains unknown" (p. 12).

Could it be that Abbott simply wanted to document the process of construction? Is it possible she was intrigued by the lines, the light, and wanted to take advantage of them to show this work in progress? Could it be she was more concerned with hauling her camera into the proper position and with which f-stop to use than she was with "articulation and miscommunication"? Consider what Abbott herself wrote of the same scene in *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer;* it is a much more straightforward approach: "It was one of my first projects requiring more than one day's shooting; I went back many times to do it from many heights, different angles and so forth. It was a very difficult project. There was the problem of gaining permission and the weather was often very cold–and I was looked upon with suspicion. Later I tried to interest the management at Rockefeller Center in the photographs but they said they had enough of their own. Of course what they had were miserable little record photographs."[2]

Weissman's essay is the least accessible of the three, but each of the writers indulges in similar analysis. Corwin, co-director of the exhibit and author of the essay on Bourke-White, discusses how Bourke-White posed workers in her industrial photographs to show scale. She writes that "the diminutive workers serve to aggrandize the factory, the oversized setting in which they are represented also points to the increasingly tenuous position of labor during the Depression" (p. 117). That might very well be true, but again, for a reader more interested in photojournalism history, such writing delves a bit far into the realm of scholarly criticism. If such analysis is what you are after, fine. But reader, beware.

The strength of the book, in addition to the nearly one hundred elegantly reproduced photographs, is how the essays tie together to show the emergence of documentary photography in the 1930s, as told through these three photographers. The narrative evolves from the least heralded (Abbott) to the most successful (Bourke-White) with Evans the figurative and literal middle. Weissman's essay, though at times difficult to digest, provides interesting insight into Abbott and her collaborator, the art critic Elizabeth McCausland. Much of the material in the essay emerged from Weissman's subsequent book, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (2011). The essay focuses on two photo-books undertaken by Abbott and McCausland. One, intended as a portrait of America, never made it to production; the other is Abbott's *Changing New York*, which focuses on the city's shifting landscape and was published in 1939 by E. P. Dutton.

McCausland defined her ideal photo-book as not just text with illustrations or plates with captions but as a "book with words and photographs marching along beside each other, complementing each other, reinforcing each other" (p. 20). She understood how the two work together in reaching a mass audience. Photographs presented in this manner were no longer abstract art, accessible to a few. A documentary photo-book could show a subject in a way in which newspaper and magazine readers could understand. To her, it would be "the great democratic book ... great in the sense of reaching out to great numbers of people" (pp. 20-21). Abbott and McCausland set out to create a great democratic book, first with their portrait of America, which never was published, and later with the documentation of New York. The New York book–at least the finished product–wasn't the great democratic book they conceived. Instead, simple captions accompanied the photos, and the book was marketed to visitors to the 1939 World's Fair–"the perfect book about New York to take home to friends and family" (p. 26). Weissman points out that had Abbott and McCausland not needed the money, they probably would not have permitted it to be published as it was. Photos from both the unpublished project and from *Changing New York* are included here, and Weissman, an assistant of professor of modern and contemporary art history, comments on many of them. Fortunately, she keeps her interpretation of the images to a minimum. The strength of her essay is how she places Abbott (and McCausland) in historical context.

Jessica May's essay is a case study of Evans's 1938 exhibition, "American Photographs," at the Museum of Modern Art, the catalog of which became a book of the same name. Evans was thirty-five and already a renowned photographer when the exhibition opened at MoMA. He had worked for the Resettlement Administration from July 1935 to February 1937, a contract job that had afforded him the opportunity and resources to make photographs in the South. But he already had an ongoing association with the museum, including his first show there, in 1933. May describes how Evans's vision

of documentary evolved, especially in relation to "Three Tenant Families," a project that he undertook with James Agee while working on a story for *Fortune* magazine and that grew into *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.* She tells how he took advantage of a long lens to compress space to make different kinds of images. Such description of how he worked provides insight into Evans as both an artist and photographer.

May reports that little is known about the specifics of the exhibition's hanging, which is not unusual for exhibitions from that time–"We know that they happened and often what was included in them, but rarely do we know much about how they looked to their audiences" (p. 72). It is known that the difference between Evans's MoMA exhibition and the book was considerable; the show clearly was more multifaceted and experimental than the catalog. The book included eighty-seven images of roughly the same size, accompanied by captions–"discreet and elegant ... it looked like art" (p. 73). But the show included one hundred photos presented in a variety of formats and in a wide range of sizes, and with no accompanying text. This was Evans's work unencumbered–"without backing, without compromise, without someone else's directives, and without any of the other hallmarks of contract or wage labor" (p. 80). Fortunately, photographs that Evans took of the hanging do exist, and two of them are included here, so it is possible to have an idea of what the exhibition looked like.

Unlike Abbott and Evans, Bourke-White was an established and financially successful commercial photographer before the crash, and when she turned her attention to documenting the effects of the Depression she did it within the demands and opportunities presented by the media. The Depression and its social toll on America forced her to consider the place of her human subjects in a modern, industrial world, and this was at "the crux of her early experiments in social documentary photography" (p. 109). Her vision shifted from machines to people while on assignment for *Fortune* in 1934 to photograph the Dust Bowl. She no longer was photographing workers in relation to machines and industry; she was showing people's bewilderment at their dire circumstances: "Her political awakening brought a new sense of possibility for her photographs as an impetus for social change" (p. 121). Bourke-White's new approach reached full flower in *You Have Seen Their Faces*, her documentation of the rural South in collaboration with Erskine Caldwell. This, Corwin writes, was the "great democratic book" that Abbott and McCausland had hoped to achieve.

As the Depression gave way to World War II, Bourke-White used her tools as a documentary photographer to cover the conflict. The other two went in different directions: Abbott focused on developing new techniques for observing scientific phenomena, and Evans documented subway passengers in New York City. Much of that history is recorded elsewhere. What this book provides is a foundational understanding of how these three photographers arrived in the 1930s as they did, how that time influenced them, and how they helped shape the emerging discipline of documentary photography.

Notes

[1]. "American Modern: Abbott, Evans, Bourke-White," Amon Carter Museum, October 2, 2010-2 January 2011, <http://www.cartermuseum.org/exhibitions/american-modern-abbott-evans-bourke-white$>$, accessed May 10, 2011.

[2]. Berenice Abbott and Hank O'Neal, *Berenice Abbott: American Photographer* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 89.

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