

Bill Gedney: A Time of Youth

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With the clarifying distance of time, the work of William Gedney, a well-regarded but little-known photographer of the 20th century, has garnered renewed significance in the realm of his canonized contemporaries—Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, and Danny Lyon. The documentary tradition in which Gedney worked is the backbone of the medium of photography itself— from William Henry Fox Talbot’s “Pencil of Nature,” in 1844, with the very first photographs of actual objects in the visible world— a leaf, a house, a monument, a shelf of books-- to Alexander Gardner’s history photographs of officers and soldiers, dead and alive, during the Civil War; Brassai’s voyeuristic glimpses of the nocturnal demimonde of Paris; Walker Evans’ seminal 1938 book, “American Photographs;” and, of course, “The Americans,” by Robert Frank-- conceived less as a document than an “artist’s book.”

In Gedney’s lifetime, between 1932 and 1989-- abbreviated by his early death at the age of fifty-six from exposure to the AIDS virus-- he made a half dozen distinct bodies of work. His first, “The Farm,” draws on the tone of observation found in his most direct antecedent, Walker Evans; Gedney’s subsequent series of pictures advance a visual dialogue with cues from those of his own generation. While it is my intention in this essay to elucidate his artistic impulse in making the series, “A Time of Youth,” and his preparations for the book, his earlier work is relevant to an edifying understanding of what led to the photographs he made in San Francisco that constitute “A Time of Youth” to begin with.

His first series, “The Farm” (1955-1959), is a visual meditation on his family homestead in upstate New York. ¹He had moved to New York City to study painting and design at the Pratt institute and he returned home for this photographic enterprise, bringing a literary regard to his subject. “Frame, proportion, perspective, the value of light and shade, all are determined by

the distance of the observing eye,” wrote Eudora Welty in “One Writer’s Beginnings,” which Gedney would copy in his journal many years later. ⁱⁱHis photographs of his grandparents on the farm are humble, straightforward in approach, and keen with clear-eyed observation, whether the image of a chair in sunlight by a window next to the bed or his grandfather stacking hay with a pitchfork.

Apart from the kinship in his pictures of “The Farm” to Walker Evans’ photographs of tenant farmers in Hale County, Alabama in 1928, or Wright Morris’ pictures of farm houses in the Western landscape, or Dorothea Lange’s migrant farm workers during the Dust Bowl, Gedney’s distinct signature grows in evidence throughout this series, in which he depicts the simplicity of daily existence with metaphorical resonance. His concise visual logic is a kind of invisible architecture out of which a feeling surfaces-- a glimmer, more often than not-- of his own sense of isolation, and longing. He made more than a few pictures of his grandmother, for example, either seen at the screen door staring out with idle reserve, (**illus. 1**) or sitting in a rocking chair in the afternoon light, her hands in her lap, gazing out the window with a same-as-it-ever-was resignation—waiting for a phantom something that seemed to be missing.

In 1964, Gedney traveled to Eastern Kentucky and sought out a family in the mining region of Appalachia as his next subject of photographic contemplation. For almost two weeks, he lived with Willie and Vivian Cornett and their twelve children in poverty-stricken Big Rock, Kentucky, immersing himself in their lives as a boarder-with-a-camera, photographing their daily interactions and activities as if he had always been a member of their family. Willie refused to take the two dollars a day Gedney offered him, but he was touched by the twenty-two dollars left on the table by the photographer with a thank you note upon his departure. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gedney’s pictures of the Cornett family are remarkable for their immediacy, intimacy, and surprising grace amidst the bleak circumstances of poverty. The brothers, often shirtless, ranging in age from pre-adolescence into early adulthood, are always tinkering with their broken-down cars, either huddled over an engine or standing around with cigarettes in their

hands. In one picture, five bare-chested brothers stand in a tribal circle around the stump of a tree, (**illus. 2**) conferring about something important, all of them staring at the ground, some with folded arms, others with hands in their back pockets, each one in isolated deliberation while Gedney captures their unintended choreographic gestures as a physical dialogue between one and another. “This photograph was about the relaxed and natural rhythms of those men’s bodies- the drape of bare arms, necks, curved backs in repose, gestures that bespoke whole lives and their connections,” writes Margaret Sartor, author and photographer (?). “The facts described a hard life and generations of it, but in this moment these men were also, undeniably, *beautiful...*”^{iv}

Five years earlier, Bruce Davidson made a photographic series about a Brooklyn street gang, young men roughly the same age as the older Cornett brothers, perhaps as impoverished, whose urban swagger added a menacing aspect to their aimlessness. Davidson, at the time barely older than his subjects, insinuated himself into their lives to gain their trust, just as Gedney had with the Cornetts. Yet, aside from the respective intentions of the two photographers, the sexuality in Davidson’s street gang pictures is palpable between the boys and their girlfriends while the sexuality in Gedney’s pictures, such as it is, derives from the longing of the photographer, if not only for the touch of his subjects’ skin, but, equally, the fraternal closeness that suffuses their daily activities.

Gedney left traces of what might be called his credo in journal inserts throughout his life. In 1983 he recorded this passage from an essay on writers in a book of collected writings called “Takes,” by Lillian Ross: “They tried to set down what was true, what could be seen and heard and touched, what could be tested and confirmed by others: what was true. They wrote about particulars; they didn’t generalize. They didn’t analyze; they tried to understand but not over interpret. They did not indulge in flourishes; they did not feel a need to show off.”^v It is an apt description of his own approach to making art with the camera—without pretense or obvious style, allowing his subject matter to be what it is. Yet, because of his choices about what to

shoot, where to stand, and when to release the shutter, the resulting pictures reflect his own intelligence and sensitivity, as a keen observer.

The emotional austerity in Gedney's rendering of "The Farm" strikes a telling counterpoint to the restless eroticism in the "Kentucky" work. "To love in this world is to be a fool, to open one's heart is to be hurt," Gedney wrote in his notebook in 1962,^{vi} a conclusion necessarily underscored by the punitive homophobic attitudes of mid-20th century America. It becomes clear from his notebooks that Gedney frequented gay clubs and engaged in casual sexual encounters with men, yet he kept that part of his life strictly partitioned from everything else. In 1963, while supporting himself with a job as a graphic designer at Time-Life Books, Gedney met Lee Friedlander and his wife, Maria. "He plunged into our domesticity-- walks in the woods near our house, meals with us and our two children, lots of talk of photographs, travel, music, films, books," Maria Friedlander recounted. "The visit over, Bill headed home to Brooklyn and to a life we didn't know very much about, the life of a loner, a very private man."^{vii} Over the years, as their friendship deepened, Maria would ask him with some delicacy if he ever thought of marriage, and his answer was always "a bellowing laugh... a signature laugh... part of the Gedney vocabulary," she said. "Whenever Bill answered the question with that laugh or used it as a comment upon some statement I made, I learned that I had come upon a gate that he kept firmly closed."

In 1966, with recommendations from Walker Evans, who was then the picture editor at *Fortune* magazine, and John Szarkowski, Director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art, Gedney was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. As Robert Frank had photographed across America on a Guggenheim in the mid-1950s, and Garry Winogrand followed, also on a Guggenheim, in 1964, Gedney, too, set out on his own systematic road trip across the country, making photographs along the way. Toward the end of this odyssey, he arrived in San Francisco and felt compelled to stay there and photograph for more than three months.

Once again, just as he documented his own family in “The Farm” and insinuated himself into the Cornett family to make the “Kentucky” photographs, (surprisingly, he never made a deliberated photographic chronicle of his surrogate family-- the Friedlanders), while exploring the streets of San Francisco Gedney gravitated to a group of itinerant “hippies”—a “family” by any other name. He entered their communal circles and photographed them in the course of their daily activities as they squatted in one vacant house and, then, another, slept together on mattresses on the floor, sat around smoking cigarettes or getting stoned, gathered on stoops and in neighborhood parks, strummed guitars, played the recorder on the streets, and attended music festivals.

Gedney’s subjects, a generation younger, were exploring a new way of being in opposition to the bourgeois conventions of his own youth. He could not know it at the time, but he was documenting the colonization of the “flower children” in what would become the very epicenter of the 1960s counterculture in an area of San Francisco that at the intersection of Haight and Ashbury Streets, where disenfranchised youth had migrated from all over the country to; the “Sexual Revolution” was born out of their unorthodox living arrangements that were communal by necessity as much as in tribal solidarity, and fueled by the heightened sensory stimulation of marijuana and psychedelic substances. The “Summer of Love” is a term that characterized the “Be-Ins” and “Happenings” in Golden Gate Park in 1967, only months after Gedney had completed his series. This “youthquake” was later given cultural definition as the “Age of Aquarius”—after a song in the emblematic Broadway musical, “Hair,” in 1968, the same year Tom Wolfe published his seminal book of essays, “The Electric Kool-Aid Acid,” about that mind-expanding cultural moment.

In Gedney’s pictures, the “flower children” do not appear light-hearted, nor do they reflect the creative optimism or “tripped-out bliss” that characterizes the mythology of the “free love movement.” Instead, they remain unequivocally disenfranchised. **(illus 3, 4)** The emotional tenor throughout these pictures is one of forlorn, if soulful, disaffection. In the very first spread of his maquette, two facing pictures show individual young men who look enough alike to be

mistaken for the same person, each one in fetal repose, one on blankets draping a couch, the other lying above the covers on a bed. In some of the pictures, reclining individuals or couples are consumed within a swirl of unkempt blankets and sheets— as if caught in cross currents that render them virtually inert.

In one haunting image, a young man is curled up asleep in an armchair as another figure, almost in silhouette, leans against the doorway, his back to the room, looking down into a stairwell. **(illus 5)** A mood of idle dislocation is established by the interplay of gestures, the reclining man's knees, side by side, facing one direction, in visual dialogue with the standing figure's arms, bent and parallel with his hands in his pockets, in perfect counterpoint.

On the surface, the pictures in "A Time of Youth" are less resolved than the photographer's two previous bodies of work. Inherent in the look of these photographs— their compositional asymmetry, less-articulated tonal ranges, and denser light—is the expression of Gedney's own existential uncertainties in the wake of their "floating existence," as he defined it,^{viii} and his proximity to their unself-conscious sexual activity. In one playfully erotic image, a handsome young man with long, well-groomed blond hair and muttonchop sideburns, who does not appear to be part of the band of hippies, leans languorously against a store window in a tight, boldly striped long sleeve pullover; his finely checked pants are tight enough to outline his genitals in semi-arousal. **(illus 6)** At first glance, his hands are crossed at his waist, posing an alluring visual riddle; in fact, they are the hands of the girl standing behind him, her arms slipped under his own, her face peeking out above his right shoulder. On his face is what is called, euphemistically, a "shit-eating" grin.

"I must tell you that we artists cannot tread the path of Beauty without Eros keeping company with us and appointing himself as our guide," writes Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*.^{ix} Gedney would later echo the presence of Eros as he wrote about the evenings in San Francisco, describing in his notebook a "restlessness, the need to search in forbidden places, but always coming back to the self, alone." ^x

While the couples in his pictures are mostly heterosexual, some photographs allow an ambiguous reading about their sexuality. Ultimately, for Gedney, the photographs in “A Time of Youth” register a new visual vocabulary, one that seems to communicate his own dislocation within the experience as much as the anxious uncertainties of the youth in his pictures.

While Gedney was photographing the hippie tribe in San Francisco, John Szarkowski was putting together what would become a landmark exhibit in the history of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, entitled “New Documents,” which introduced the work of Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand. Szarkowski asserted that, until then, the aim of documentary photography had been to show what was wrong with the world, as a way to generate interest in rectifying it. But this show signaled a change. “In the past decade a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends,” he wrote in the wall text for the show. “Their aim has been not to reform life, but to know it.”^{xi}

Szarkowski had defined a mutational shift in photographic artmaking at the very moment that Gedney’s own artistic impulses exemplified it. Gedney’s work in San Francisco captured not only the chaos and confusion in the lives of his subjects but, equally, his existential turmoil in relation to them. Upon his return to New York, Szarkowski offered Gedney a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art that included images of the Cornett family in Kentucky and the youth in San Francisco, which opened in December 1968.

“Gedney has not created polemical or propaganda pictures,” states the MoMA press release for the exhibit. “Rather, with grace and clarity, he depicts the personal and universal aspects of two groups that society considers outside its value system: the San Francisco radicals who have dropped out by choice, and the mountain people who have been dropped out by the choice of history.” In the wall text, John Szarkowski observes that the individuals in Gedney’s pictures are more complex and more interesting than the clichés: “These are not photographs of hillbillies

and hippies, but of people living precariously under difficulty.... Gedney, being a good witness, does not attempt to direct our verdict concerning the quality of these lives. He does allow us to see that they are in many ways much like our own.”^{xii}

Soon after his exhibit at MoMA, Gedney, who had begun a preliminary sequence of his San Francisco pictures, made an elaborate notebook entry about the structure of the book he intended for the work. “I am attempting a literary form in visual terms,” he wrote.^{xiii} And, then, he mapped out a distinct narrative structure, not unlike that of a novel, with seven individual sections: “The morning, *awakening*;” “The day outside;” “Change and reestablishing;” “The day inside;” “The night;” “The new pad;” and “Codification.”

He specified the proportion of the book – 8 ½ inches x 8 ½ inches—allowing for a variation in size so long as the book remained in square format. His final dummy of “A Time of Youth,” to which this publication maintains exacting fidelity, adheres to his narrative structure, absent any identifying section headings or breaks. “I am telling a story with characters that reappear and scenes that are repeated,” he wrote in his notebook entry. Definitive, if unidentified, protagonists do appear throughout the pictures in the various activities that constitute its sequential narrative; leitmotifs, too, permeate the series, such as the recorder player who shows up from time to time throughout the work.

In Gedney’s notes, he divulges something of a revelation about the San Francisco youth he had documented, yet his conclusion is colored by the distrust with which he kept his own feelings at a distinct protective remove. “The power of youth, the proclamation of a new way... is only the old way made to look new, the power of rebirth, the breaking down of the self if only for a few hours to become part of a crowd, a community, the feeling of spring and new trust in love, however false.”^{xiv}

Gedney included an epigraph at the beginning of the dummy--“They seem to be doing happy things sadly, or maybe they’re doing sad things happily”— John Cage. An artistic deity for

Gedney, Cage strikes an oracular note about the book that, by all intents and purposes, reflects the tone of the story Gedney found himself telling with the pictures.

The title, “A Time of Youth” first appears in his journal entry on March 19, 1969 and he completed the maquette on April 16, 1969. “While I don’t have a definitive quote or journal entry from Gedney on why he chose “A Time of Youth” as the title,” reported Lisa McCarthy, who was curator of the Gedney archive at Duke university from 2014-2019 and initiated the first exhibition of Gedney’s book projects, “I can confirm that he considered these in journal entries at some point in the process: “Youth;” “A Cult of Youth;” “A Voyage of Youth;” “An Odyssey of Youth;” “Youth Odyssey;” “91 Photographs - San Francisco 1966-1967;” “Youth - 91 Photographs - San Francisco 1966-1967.”^{xv}

In the mid-1960s, Duane Michals was first to introduce the single-image, multi-frame narrative sequence to modern photography. Whether Gedney was influenced by Michals’ sequences directly, or not, the fact of their contemporaneous exploration of storytelling in photographic imagery is noteworthy. Michals departed from factual documentation by constructing the circumstances in his pictures; his stories from beginning, middle and end were invented, often with allegorical **intent**. Gedney’s stories, by contrast, were discovered in the moment, observed, captured from real-life, grounded in factual reality, and unfold in a non-linear narrative with the accumulation of images in book form.

The trajectory of Gedney’s work is consistent with the evolution of photographic artmaking in his own time, from the bedrock documentation of Walker Evans and Robert Frank to his direct contemporaries in their depictions of contemporary tribal forms, both Bruce Davidson, with Brooklyn Street Gang and Danny Lyon, with his series, The Bikeriders, in 1968. “Gedney seemingly always photographed the same way throughout his career, using the same stylistic tools drawn from documentary photography- a small format, a direct focus, black and white prints,” writes Gilles Mora, “and never tempted by anything beyond an unaffected vision of reality.”^{xvi}

“‘A Time of Youth’ is not merely a project on the hippie communes of that era but rather an homage to Youth, Gedney’s great motivation,” Mora writes. “Many of his photos are a hymn to an age he knows to be transient, full of ambiguities, freighted with a fascinating immaturity. William Gedney’s gaze possesses the emotionally moving lucidity of a man who understands he is already excluded from that fragile and dazzling beauty. His most endearing portraits reveal, behind an adolescent innocence, the seeds of a sexual attraction that never leaves him, one that he urgently needs to capture and that, he understands, has become the absolute driving force of his photographic impulse. Gedney himself described this impulse as no more than “The project of the mind into flesh.”^{xvii}

Gedney was urbane and well-read, a committed teacher at the Cooper Union and Pratt Institute, and a single-minded artist. “I am concerned with making a good photograph—an uncropped blending of form, value and content,” he wrote in a draft of a letter about “A Time of Youth” to a publisher. “I prefer the ordinary action, the intimate gesture, an image whose form is an instinctive reaction to the material.”^{xviii}

His natural inclination to make books of his photographs—there are maquettes for **seven** books among his papers at Duke University—may have been motivated by the absence of platforms for viewing photographs in the era in which he worked. Until the early 1960s, there had been only one photography gallery in New York—The Limelight Gallery-- which also doubled as a West Village coffee house. Helen Gee, who owned it, barely sold a picture and had to close the gallery in 1961. There was nothing of a market for lens-based art and scarcely any demand for photography books. During the landmark “New Documents” show at MoMA in 1967, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand all received inquiries from a guard at MOMA to buy their pictures. “Diane and Garry and I talked about it because we didn’t know what [to do],” Friedlander recalled fifty years later. “We’d never sold a print. We decided that \$25 was right. And that was the only sale we made.”^{xix} Lee Witkin would not open his gallery until 1969, the only photography gallery in New York for several more years; his first exhibition introduced

several emerging photographers: Duane Michals, George Tice, and Burk Uzzle. Their prints were priced at \$15-\$35. Only three were sold.

While it took enterprise and determination for Gedney to conceive of the San Francisco series as a book, necessity, too, was the mother of invention. There was simply no other platform for the work to be seen as an entity. That it is being published, finally, after fifty years, is a tribute to the scholarship and determination of Lisa McCarty **and** Margaret Sartor.

In 2000, on the occasion of an exhibition of Gedney's work at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Vince Aletti, the photography critic, wrote that the photographer "put his passion, his longing, his care, and his intelligence into tough, tender pictures that burn even more brightly in their absence." ^{xx} In "A Time of Youth," Gedney was focused on making good photographs, one at a time, as he followed his exotic young subjects around, yet, without quite realizing it, he succeeded in producing a chronicle of historical relevance while leaving traces of his own existential condition that resonate beyond his personal experience.

New York, 2019

ENDNOTES –

ⁱ William Gedney Photographs and Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Duke University. Box

ⁱⁱ William Gedney notebook entry, November 20, 1985. David M. Rubenstein Library.

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^{iv} Margaret Sartor, "What Was True," *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney* (New York: WW Norton/Lyndhurst, 2000) 16.

^v Ibid, p ? or actual box in the library

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Maria Friedlander, Foreward, *What Was True: The Photographs and Notebooks of William Gedney* (New York: WW Norton/Lyndhurst, 2000)

^{viii} What Was True?

^{ix} Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam Classics, 1988), p. 340.

^x Margaret Sartor, "Short Distances and Definite Places," *Only the Lonely*, from "William Gedney: Only the Lonely: 1955-1984) 97

^{xi} MoMA files on-line archive exhibition history

^{xii} Press release/Wall text, archive exhibition history, MoMA website

^{xiii} Notebook, March 22-23, 1969, pp 14, 17-18. William Gedney Photographs and Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Duke University.

^{xiv} TK

^{xv} Author e-mail correspondence with Lisa MCCarty, Nov 1, 2019)

^{xvi} Gilles Mora: “William Gedney, So Similar, So Different, Alone are the Lonely” Only the Lonely, from “William Gedney: Only the Lonely: 1955-1984 P9

^{xvii} Mora, pp 12

^{xviii} Vince Aletti, “William Gedney: A New View of the Photographer Who Looked at Life on the Margins, *Out* magazine, February 2000, pp. 32, 33.

^{xix} Lee Friedlander in Public Conversation with GianCarlo Roma, “Live from the New York Public Library,” June 20, 2017)

^{xx} (Vince Aletti, “William Gedney: A New View of the Photographer Who Looked at Life on the Margins, *Out* magazine, February 2000, pp. 32, 33)