

**The Reason Why They Open**

“So many things, the doors that open, and the reason why they open,  
And the things that the hands that open the doors have already done....”

—Fernando Pessoa, “Time’s Passage” (translated by Richard Zenith)

Steel Stillman investigates the past but avoids drowning in it. What I say about Steel is my projection—not the truth of his life or his photographs. I must now keep close watch over my language, as if it might rush into traffic, take an illicit drug, or crack the whip on itself. Where did the whip come from? Most elements in a photograph, or in a paragraph, don’t belong. We make sense of the world without demanding that the world know what it contains. We don’t ask a photograph to divulge its inventory—to read us its list of ingredients—before we look at it.

In his studio, Steel keeps index-card files, containing his old snapshots—a cache he plunders for material. He reclaims an original snapshot, excerpts it, distills it. To abstract a photo is to ennoble it, and to evade it. Why insist that we confront the past? Better to crawl around the fringes of the event, especially if we could never swallow or rectify its nature.

If you place layer after layer upon an original photo, you intensify its mystery and forgive its sins. Neither Steel nor I believe in originals, but we like to hold them up as role models—emulation posts, like a cat’s scratching post, where the creature can wean itself of its nervousness, its aggressiveness, its *nostalgie de le boue*. The cat misses the mud-of-yore. What does the photographer miss? We scratch our way out of original peril by remixing the past, layering it, isolating details from the morass.

The original photo and its denizens seem to have perished in flame, but the flame keeps occurring. The fire never completes its destruction of the body; the fire continues, every time the photographer revises the image, revisits its plangent surface by adding another layer. We’re not wrong to summon cinematic parallels for Steel’s art of destruction and replenishment (a merry-go-round relation to death, whereby cessation is evaded by repetition). Looking at Steel’s photographs, I think of Marcel Broodthaers’ short *Voyage on the North Sea*; the work of Robert Bresson and Alain Resnais; Michelangelo Antonioni’s black-and-white existential melodramas; and the title (or transitional) sequences in classic Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s (such as *Portrait of Jennie*), where whirlwinds and floods and other disasters seem to take place behind a placid scrim. The characters in Steel’s photos float on top of a transparent surface; beneath this safety net, meteorological peril reigns. The characters escape wind-storm and sea-swell by taking shelter on top of the picture plane, like a trap door made of clear acetate. Horror, trauma, unrest: these forces cavort behind the acetate. Above the pond that paralyzes Narcissus, no catastrophe can remember its name.

We keep a distance from turmoil through the art of being fastidious. We don't advocate embracing chaos itself. How would we recognize confusion, if it called out to us? Would it say, "I'm chaos, beckoning you"? Turmoil remains voiceless, faceless. Fastidiousness, however, we can grasp. We can learn how to exercise a vocabulary of edges, lines, shadows, curves. We can embrace the wrinkled, faceted face of the devices we employ as mediators, dividing us from a void that may hector and beseech us but has no means of direct address without this lexicon of marks and traces that we interpose between the void's facelessness and our hunger for human reciprocity.

It's as if one morning, April 1985, in the city or the country, somewhere you can't remember exactly, you were reading an early novel by Henry James, one of his more accessible creations, *Roderick Hudson*. You turned to this book for nourishment—to sharpen your consciousness, to loosen the hold of your immediate environment (kitchen, porch, newspaper, spouse, parent, dog). Was that moment a highlight of your life—when you read *Roderick Hudson* for the first time and saw your own head's shadow cast on the page? The book's gutter subdivided the shadow asymmetrically. A forensic atmosphere now envelops the room when you reflect on it—as if a crime asked to be investigated, and we needed to disperse fingerprint powder over every surface.

I won't ask Steel about the crime. "Crime," here, is a metaphor. We amplify our language to make clear an understory that might go unheard if we did not resort to hyperbole. Maybe a better word would be "mistake." I could ask Steel what the mistake was, what went wrong, or seemed to go wrong. I could ask Steel to teach a master class

in the arts of correction: through what alchemies and surgeries do we manage to crop, magnify, or alter our remnant images to make them speak more clearly? And I could ask Steel why speaking clearly often requires the use of blur, omission, refraction, truncation, erasure, and disguise. Beauty, I imagine Steel would say, comes to us most directly when we bluff. Don't show your hand. Don't display the candle and its flame. Depict what the candle left behind, a circle of pooled wax assembled into concrescences and turbulences almost resembling a familiar face.

Steel seems to like color best when it is blurred. Make chroma write its autobiography: *the story of my life as a secret weeper*. Black-and-white photographs wear a mask of sternness and diagnosis. And yet even the clarified realm of black-and-white can edge toward color by including half-conscious innuendos of green, red, blue, yellow, and purple. The greys of Steel's black-and-white images pulsate with suggestions of colors that are, for the moment, forbidden.

Not every image needs to be seen as psychological. Sometimes an image can express the stress that the earth undergoes as it shifts in its sleep. California has faults. So does New York City. Photographs have fault lines, where sedimented layers rustle and grow uneasy. Steel has chosen to make himself at home in the fault line. Art, he indicates, can thrive where a life's different layers murmur as they jostle for position, trying to find a location where they can preserve their information without spilling it. This state of *not spilling* reminds me of what Susan Sontag (who shares Steel Stillman's initials) wrote about the aesthetics of silence: "As some people know now, there are ways of thinking

that we don't yet know about. Nothing could be more important or precious than that knowledge, however unborn." Steel Stillman, by using photography to investigate the vocal places inside enigmatic images, and by investigating these secrets without forcing them to speak, is helping to give birth to this optimistic understanding that *there are ways of thinking that we don't yet know about*—a notion optimistic because it reaches toward a future of perpetual exploration. Above all, we must not insist that these incipient ways of thinking declare themselves by shouting. We must, instead, learn to navigate the unknown terrain with tools not involving language—involving, instead, the after-memory to which the story gave rise, an after-taste of ambivalence, an excitement now muted to amnesia, when the story ceased to remember where the trouble began. The door ceased to remember the hands that opened it, though the photographer's hands retained a sense-memory of how the tell-tale door gave way, through a window, to a pastoral vista we insist upon calling tranquil despite its undertone of terror.