

Composition is King

I sat down to write my thoughts on Seth David Rubin's new work "Pieces," and all the other work over the years that seem to lead up to it I've seen. But before doing this I want to write something about myself. I'm not an art critic, nor a critic of new photography. I don't have the critical vocabulary that people writing about any kind of art ought to have. However, I'm an old man now, and have spent many, many hours—even days, months, and years—looking at art. When you do that you can't help having all sorts of opinions about whatever kind of art you're seeing—be it very familiar, or utterly new and different. One becomes complacent. You think you know just about everything there is to know. To make matters worse—or maybe better—I myself am an artist. People looking at some of my films can't help saying now and then, "Oh, this is a work of art!" Good.

But as it turned out when I first met Seth Rubin in 1993, when the Merchant and Ivory Foundation gave him a lot of space in a photographic exhibition in the Red Mill in Claverack, I realized that really, I didn't know all that much about the art of making pictures with a still camera, and that it had moved on, like other arts. Yes, I was very much aware of the great twentieth-century master photographers. But I had viewed photography—even their photography—as a kind of mere recording of reality. Of preserving the look of people, things, and places, however beautifully. I was like the Parisians in the mid-nineteenth century who thought they knew everything about painting—until they encountered the Impressionists. Like them, I was pulled up short, but by Seth Rubin. I saw in his Red Mill show that the pictures he had made were another sort of reality having only to do with themselves. As with the late nineteenth-century connoisseurs, who had finally got the Impressionists, the next generation had to get the Cubists and the wild-looking things they were making, in which the old visual realities had been broken up into dynamic shards—rather as Seth Rubin has done here.

Let me point out the bend in the path of the road leading me to a new appreciation of how photography can create abstract images potentially as powerful and unsettling in their impact on viewers as the paintings of 1910 Paris had been to that generation. Here is a photograph of Seth Rubin's right arm, covered in black ash, flung down in the snow. It was a disturbing thing—but a beautiful thing I had to own; I count it still as one of my favorite objets d'art, and I have a long history of collecting.

Now we have come with Seth Rubin to a lot of broken bottles. But who has not picked up a shard of broken glass—a chip—maybe blue, maybe brown, maybe black, maybe clear, and stared closely at it, turning it over in the hand, as tiny worlds move this way and that, catching the light, sometimes blurry, sometimes sharp as the facets of a diamond? Do not suppose that any of those facets here have fallen into their final places accidentally. They have been put there just so, by as sharp-eyed an artist as any old Flemish master devising his perfect world. And as always, since the first daguerreotype of a man—one having his shoes shined on a street in Paris in 1839—and as with every good photographer making a picture since then, to Seth composition is King.