

Light in Stones
by Jan K. Celis, 1977

An encounter with Milos Sejn's photographs leads me to several ideas in the sphere of which the outlines of the meaning of this genre within the overall direction of Sejn's art work may emerge. The suggestion of integrity is induced by this art work, with its inner tension between the many-sidedness and tightness and the idea of the organising order of the world, which is manifested through the synthesising effort accompanied by patience in surmounting each step leading to the entirety, still preserving the focus on a specified area. Such an approach in my notes is also supported by the fact that Milos Sejn considers photography to be a marginal, yet no less serious area of his activity, the centre of which he sees in painting, although he may have taken photographs before he started to paint. It may also seem paradoxical that this collection of photographs is actually his artistic debut. A journey on a steep slope is always slower and only rarely straight. Sejn's conviction of marginality of photography still does not reject the fact however specific photography is, some features are manifested through it which resound with the overall direction of his art work. These features will emerge while viewing the collection.

Photography for Milos Sejn has since the very beginning been closely bound to his interest in nature which, however, has never been a mere aesthetic view but was connected with studying it and, for some time, with a specialist's narrow focus. The period of ornithological fever, when he waited for hours, hidden in lakeside vegetation, for a convenient moment to trigger his camera, was a lucky connection of two technically quite mastered expert skills, in which photography was subordinate to scientific interest, while this interest found its expression primarily in photography. Anyway, the recognition of organic order, brought forth by a scientific approach, was not the truth in finding where Milos Sejn would see his true realisation. Therefore, his interests moved closer towards expression designated as art expression. The tendency towards specialisation, revealing not only one of his character qualities, remains typical for the method of art work based, on the one hand, on a profound knowledge of what the subject of art creation is and the manner in which this creation will be made. Thus, despite the fact that the exhibited collection lacks a single scientific photograph, I found it necessary to mention this approach, as also in this case the discovery of secrets of the natural order is the hidden fundament. Understanding it is relatively similar to Callois' approach of "cross sciences" which seeks joint rules between the natural kingdoms while revealing naturally anchored functions of the art form, its creation and growth in an area or space of an art work.

I will try to explain Sejn's attitude to the natural phenomena through photographs on the topic of stone which we could, peculiarly enough, call geological stories. Everything here is conceived as an event. The position of each stone is a witness to their thousand-year motion in which a further move is halted by one stone hitting another. Emphasising their long-lasting transformation, the aspect of time which is an expression of the temperamental feeling of the author, adds to the topic dynamics and mightiness, expressing which might tempt to literary romanticism and flat ostentation if perceived on the surface only. This pragmatic approach, finding the mightiness of nature not in optical enchantment but in the inner rules of its creative power, reaches the lyrics and pathos and reveals its ancestry, including the admiring study of matter proportions and the inner and outer spatial relations in the sculpting work of H. Moore.

Geological stories are just one of the complete collections of photographs by Milos Sejn. However, their topic is quite narrow, not only the scope of subjects of the photographs which can be generally referred to as elements, but also the collection of only a few geographically narrowly specified locations where Milos Sejn takes his photographs. These exhibits were made between 1970 and 1977 and their models were found in several natural areas of the Krkonose mountains – the Mumlava River and Bila Skala – and Cesky raj – Javorovy dul in Prachovske Rocks, Plakanek valley near Kost castle and Zebin hill. The latest discovery was the Gaderska valley in the Velka Fatra Mountains. This selection of themes, some of which can actually be viewed from one spot, is quite in line with the method of work of Milos Sejn, who himself refers to his photography as "meditation in nature".

The expressions of dynamic relationships between snow, water and stones in the photographs of the Mumlava River in the spring are just another alternative to the same topic, the expression of natural order in its happenings and transformations as events.

The snow melting in the river among stones is a hidden contest of elements. Stones, washed and pulled by the water for centuries, are the dam, the barrier to the melting coat. In this happening they dynamically confront one another and their shape and position express also their character: the variability of water flowing and the stability of the stones express different aspects of their existence in time. Abstraction is the presumption to emphasise this aspect in a photograph, the simplification of the picture to the most substantial, i.e. the mutual relationships among the elements, realised in photography primarily by the picture and light contrasts. Milos Sejn mentions "deceiving geometrical forms".

In the transformation of natural reality into an image, the meaning of elements as natural order, some of the mystery of which is unveiled, is put forward. The water washes away the stone; however, doesn't it change into a stone itself?

The photography itself becomes part of this order, with light being its very element. The light represents the most unstable aspect of time and also an equal component of reality, its relations in shape and time. The message of the picture is an expression of the nature of the actual taking of the photograph. If a strong aspect of event is seen in whatever is in the photograph, thus being the expression of permanently transmitting natural elements seeking order, the photographer's view also shares the effort, organising the viewing of things into the order of creative work. Some photographs present the reality quite obvious at first glance. Unlike with geometry created by contrast, light here depicts the values of the area, whether a forest growth creating ornamenting structures, mist covered reflections of trees on the water's surface or a sandstone rock covered with moss and lichen, or a composition of several structures in a natural unit, with forest light setting up darker and lighter strips. The transience of light in them is just the transformation of elements which cannot be grasped from moment to moment, being the tension of action.

The relationship of Sejn's photography to reality came to my attention when I was viewing these photographs, made by the contact technique, through a magnifying glass. However obscure this method may seem (and, actually, why not magnify a photograph?), the photograph then gives the impression of living reality. This impression is possible just because of the values and gradations which cannot be preserved in magnifying the negative, however perfect it would be. However, the impression of reality is accompanied by the opposite feeling – a feeling of the unreal. A close attachment to the reality makes its magical copy, in which the sense of facticity is converted with its overlap into imagery. The elements of irrational coincidence also contribute hereto – Milos Sejn, with his own humour, mentions the "wanderer's walking stick" which, traditionally, "appears tossed away" in the realised image. So the more the photography becomes itself, the more it clings to the image of reality, thus actually to itself. The strengthened effect and enrichment with a new dramatic quality brings a method of placing several contacts, which are a shifted shot of one and the same motif, besides each other. The succession of events in two slides in a film strip is a result of the mutually open relationship between the motif and the photographer in time and space. The simultaneous view, making a specific type of open space, is somewhat close to this movie-like approach (I can reveal that this is one of Sejn's unfulfilled wishes), and yet it is part of the peculiar image poetics.

The irrational of the randomly tossed "walking stick" in magical copies is not far away from the irrational into which the seemingly strict and logical geometry is reversed. They both have a lyrical aspect in the sphere of which the apparency of the tight bondage between imagery and reality emerges. The secret of reality, however, is unveiled only to those who have patience and trust and accept the order of the photographer's camera lens. This order also incorporates the form chosen by the photographer. The exhibition features various close-ups of one and the same negative beside each other. The format promotes or covers some sides of the image. The use of a small format, in combination with the selection of a particular type of paper, emphasises in this case the magical attitude in the relationship between photograph and reality. The large format, on the other hand, emphasises composition and image components in the photograph. Besides this, the format has another meaning – it proposes to the spectator the distance from which the photograph should be viewed as an entity. It is just like in reality – we view some things from very close and some from a distance. This distance is the bearer of a certain meaning not only towards the image but also toward itself: connected with a certain feeling of the spectator, it becomes one of the dimensions of the photograph as an art work.

The polarity of the magical copies and image compositions is only a different expression of the joint sense of Sejn's photography – the relationship between reality and imagination. In the tension between reality as a fact and imagination as a possibility, the world is realised as something which isn't rigid, recorded once and forever and unchangeable, or something wayward and arbitrary, but the dynamic order of nature, whether with the geological story of the stones or the morphological story of the plants.

It just takes us back to the initial notes on the photographs made by a painter who tries to answer the question of the relationship between a painting and photography. Those who know Sejn's creative work certainly find similarities in both genres. I actually indicated that above. On the one hand, landscape portrayal while investigating the relationships of colours, especially recently, and on the other hand a study of spatial relationships of natural forms, resounding with the work of many creative predecessors, yet on his own obstinate journey and in the effort to merge both, this is the span which has so far seemed to be the axis of travel of Sejn's work. This polarity is manifested in Sejn's photographs as well. Why doesn't he then resort to only photography, or to only painting, especially if he claims his key means of expressing himself are paintings? I will leave this question open. For the time being, the reply we can give is that the creator never belongs to himself but to his work which tells him what he

should do. Whether the work of Milos Sejn is good or bad, I will leave to others' judgement; these notes were aimed at unveiling the meaning of his work.

by Jan K. Celis, November 1977

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