

“Seizing the Day”

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Geoff Baker’s landscapes of northeastern Ohio and northwestern Michigan expand our understanding of what Henri Cartier-Bresson called his quest for “the decisive moment.” In Cartier-Bresson’s celebrated images, that “moment” is generally confined to street scenes inhabited by a person caught unawares – a pedestrian jumping over a puddle; a young man giving his girl friend a bunch of flowers. The subject’s dynamic body language dominates the frame, engaged in a kind of visual dialogue with something in the background – a shadow, a piece of architecture, graffiti. With one uncanny act of perception, the photographer becomes the hero of his quest.

Baker is also involved in a quest for the decisive moment, but in a profoundly different setting. Here, the subject – a durable old barn, a skeletal tree, a murky marsh – is fixed and unmoving, deeply grounded amid the unknowable changes of weather and the seasons. From a world of human-centered flux, we have entered a world where man in his quotidian habits is absent, where nature rules. It is a decidedly American world, continuous with the “sublime” in the 19th century vistas of Bierstadt and Church, the chastened humility of Thoreau and Melville, the transcendentalism of Emerson.

Baker is a native of Aurora, Ohio, a classic “small town” between Cleveland and Youngstown that has retained evidence of its rural, early 19th century roots in the face of suburban sprawl. A former executive at Republic Steel who is currently engaged in a high-tech startup, he belongs to that American tradition of businessmen/artists exemplified by the composer Charles Ives and the poet Wallace Stevens. And like those two connoisseurs of American splendor, he has remained loyal to a homegrown passion, an adolescent avocation for photography. Cartier-Bresson’s restless, chance encounters have the charm of discovery. Baker’s landscapes offer another satisfaction -- that of a photographer who has spent a lifetime revisiting the scenes that enchanted him as a child.

If Cartier-Bresson’s great subject was form, Baker’s is light - most often, first light. He stalks his subject in boots and field jacket, toting camera bag and tripod, positioning himself at the edge of a clearing or a marsh, a good walk from the nearest paved surface. His palette is dynamic, an emerging one of blacks and grays as they turn into whites, greens, browns, yellows, mauves, oranges and blues – the mottled hues of shadowy things taking shape in the dawn of a new day.

One morning, Geoff picked me up at an early hour and we drove south into the country. We parked along a deserted roadside and ventured with flashlight into woods that Geoff called “a favorite haunt.” We stopped by the edge of a pond and waited. And waited. Then, without warning other than the flapping of birds rising from the water and a chorus of frogs belching on the far bank, the light came.

Geoff crouched behind his camera. A soft click. Then another. And another. I could almost feel the rising mist on my face. Overhead, clouds raced. Click. Click. And then it was over.

“That’s it for this morning,” Geoff said in the now flat, no longer mysterious light. The camera went back into the bag. I heard the sound of cars out on the road. The decisive moment had passed.