

## Reflections on David Simonton's *North Carolina at Night* Photographs

A paradoxical beauty draws one to the unwelcoming images of David Simonton's nighttime photographs. The black-and-white prints, from the ongoing *North Carolina at Night* series, focus on the *unbeautiful*. Simonton is in the habit of exploring shuttered, out-of-the-way places in the after-hours. In these rigorously composed shots of nondescript sites - generally uninhabited, sometimes inhospitable - the photographer demonstrates a faith in the viewer's ability to extrapolate from what little is said. An end-of-day hush, if not tranquility, presides. And the modest subjects, discovered in a minor-key stillness and darkness, are described in a restrained formal vocabulary that nonetheless admits telling details.

Photographing at night lets (and makes) the photographer take his time, unbothered by the distractions of passing traffic or shifting sunlight. Carefully positioning his tripod and camera, Simonton achieves a tightly integrated composition with a Precisionist painting's clarity. His subjects obligingly reduce themselves to the lines, rectangles, pentagons, and circles of his surface design. With an unflinching sense of balance, Simonton brings intelligence to the interplay of shapes. Triangles, trapezoids, and parallelograms are detected (in the shadows if not in the structures themselves). And all intersect in a plane geometry of elegantly gauged proportions, braced by the square format.

Simonton's disciplining aesthetic and polished technique assert a controlled, but not mannered, authority over a refractory world. If Simonton wields formalism to extract order from disorder, he also manipulates night light - in both its artificial and natural forms - with surpassing skill. He takes advantage of the long exposure time to elicit the maximum amount of moonlight and starlight from the evening skies and to bend the unkind glare of artificial light into an eerily expressive tool. Simonton can literally draw with light. In "Bailey, November 1997" a star high overhead elongates from a pinpoint into a streak of luminescence. In "Johnston County, January 1998" a lit-up billboard seen from the side becomes a seemingly self-generated brilliance, a force almost, rather than a shape, that charges the composition. The artist's heightened sensitivity to limited light and to the potent play of shadows enables him to illuminate a lackluster world.

Though these abstracted compositions retail no social commentary, one cannot overlook the photographer's choices of subject, of presentation: the well-worn, the guarded caught in the cadence felt at close of day. The prevailing sense of time past and time lost spells a tenuousness about the future. Reticent but not mute, these withdrawn scenes speak with complex eloquence. In the dark, Simonton exposes light. In the edited reality of his minimalist approach, he leaves room for the complicating details alive in depth and texture. In his stable, even static format, he allows an awareness of mortality to intrude. The reductive geometry does not fully suppress meaning. These black-and-white photographs, with their richly allusive gray tonalities, frame the change that characterizes life. And banked within their solid construction is verification of the transformative power of light.

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