UC Berkeley

Title
Front Row Seats   [Portfolio]

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Author
Campbell, Robert

Publication Date
2002-06-01

Peer reviewed

Front Row Seats

Photographs by Robert Campbell

Architecture critic Robert Campbell is also a photographer. His subject is what the British Townscape photographers said theirs was: "topography." Like most serious photographers, Campbell approaches some subjects in an objective manner, for instance in head-on views of signs and letters on building facades, taking pictures that are (by his own admission) homages to Walker Evans; the photographs shown here are not those. Other subjects, examples of which are shown here, he approaches more experientially, taking pictures that may for instance be inspired by evanescent light on well-known places he has come upon on his travels.

The writing of a skilled critic should be objective too; and, in a sense, we hope it is also experiential (though I have known critics who prided themselves on the tricky business of being able, for occasional purposes, to write about architecture solely on the basis of others' photographs). But I think the two manners of a photographer are more distinct one from the other. One way a photographer has of signaling experience is by presenting a seat to the viewer of the picture. (In one photograph by Ezra Stoller, lest we overlook the seat's role, the photographer adds books, slippers, and a peeled fruit, all of which intensify the sales pitch.) In Campbell's pictures shown here, seats play a more complex role: They are attractive but full of ambiguity. Only sometimes are they seats in which we could view the scene he is ostensibly presenting to us, and almost always the picture would collapse without them. In all but one photograph, the one taken in Sydney, we would clearly need permission to take one of the seats, and in Sydney the sun will be so low in moments that it is almost too late to sit down.

—*Cervin Robinson*

The Nuclear American Family, Boston

Pink Porch, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts

A Place To Sit, Macao

Former Poor Farm, Vermont

Harbor Light, Sydney