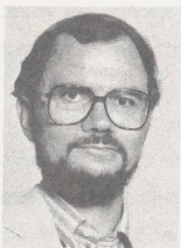


To yderpunkter i mellemkrigstidens fotografi: Edward Weston og William Mortensen -en kontrastiv præsentation



af forskningsbibliotekar
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Mellemkrigstiden var fotografiets formative periode: i alt væsentligt var teknikken færdigudviklet, optisk set allerede omkring århundredskiftet med fremregningen af anastigmatene, og kemisk set i midten af trediverne med farvefilmens fremkomst. De sidste 50 år har hovedsagelig bragt forbedringer og finpudsninger af det velkendte, med undtagelse af straksbilledteknikken og holografiet, der hver for sig har fundet deres niche - og som måske nok vil være afsæt for den videre udvikling, sammen med det elektroniske derivat: TV/video.

Der er heller ikke sket afgørende nybrud i synet på fotografiet og dets forhold til den virkelighed, der afbildes (men nok nuanceringer - og i høj grad i omfanget af billedbrugen): skillelinjen går, nu som før, mellem dem, der mener, at fotografiet så nøjagtigt som muligt skal - og kan - reproducere objektet, og dem, der hævder, at fotografiets virkelighedsgengivelse under alle omstændigheder er en illusion, og at fotografen derfor må være fri til at bearbejde sit materiale i enhver henseende. Med et lidt misvisende udtryk betegner man de to retninger som henholdsvis objektiv og subjektiv fotografi: misvisende, fordi et i teknisk forstand sagligt fotografi meget vel kan være udtryk for et højst subjektivt valg, medens omvendt et i ydre forstand subjektivt - konstrueret og manipuleret - billede kan være langt mere sandt, end den optisk korrekte afbildning; man tænke blot på portrættet.

I det følgende vil jeg forsøge kontrastivt at præsentere to fotografer, hvis produktion repræsenterer yderpunkter i denne henseende, ved at fokusere på karakteristiske forskelle i deres billedsyn, belyst ved citater og illustrere kontrasten med et udvalg af deres billeder. Den første ser billeder, den anden konstruerer dem. - At valget faldt på amerikanere, er ikke tilfældigt: netop USA var, sammen med Weimar-republikken og det ikke-fascistiske Centraleuropa, brændpunkt for eksperimenter med den endnu nye grafiske teknik.

Edward Weston (1886-1958) er berømt for sin perfektion, sin besættelse af storformatets nøjagtige gengivelse: "The flame (of recognition) started first by amazement over subject matter, that flame which only a great artist can have - not the emotional pleasure of the layman - but the intuitive understanding and recognition relating obvious reality to the esoteric, must then be confined to a form within which it can burn with a focussed intensity: otherwise it flares, smokes and is lost like in an open bonfire" (Daybooks, vol. 11, p. 151).

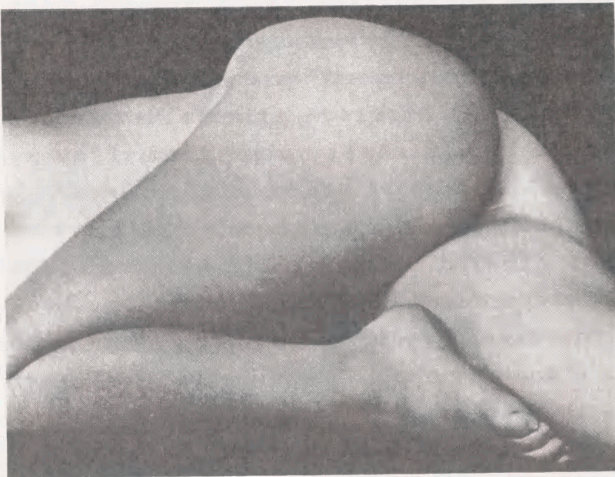
Om fotografiet som øjeblikkets kunst skriver han: "Unlike other mediums of expression that demand a greater or lesser expending of time for the realization of original vision, the actual making of a photograph is accomplished, so to speak, in a moment. Not as a writer makes notes for further elaboration into a story, not as a painter makes sketches that be later worked into picture: not the idea, suggestion, but the whole picture is made on the instant. So nearly do conception and execution coincide, they may be said to be simultaneous. Of course that is the negative; the print - the form in which the picture will be seen - remains to be made. But that is only a matter of carrying out the complete vision as represented by the negative; it can be done ten minutes later or ten years." (Weston i "California and the West", p. 185).

Sit kunstneriske credo har han formuleret således: "April 24, 1930. I sent the following statement to Houston, Texas, where I am showing forty prints during May. Clouds, torsos, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smokestacks are but interdependent, inter-related parts of a whole, which is life. Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole. The creative force in man recognizes and records these rhythms with the medium most

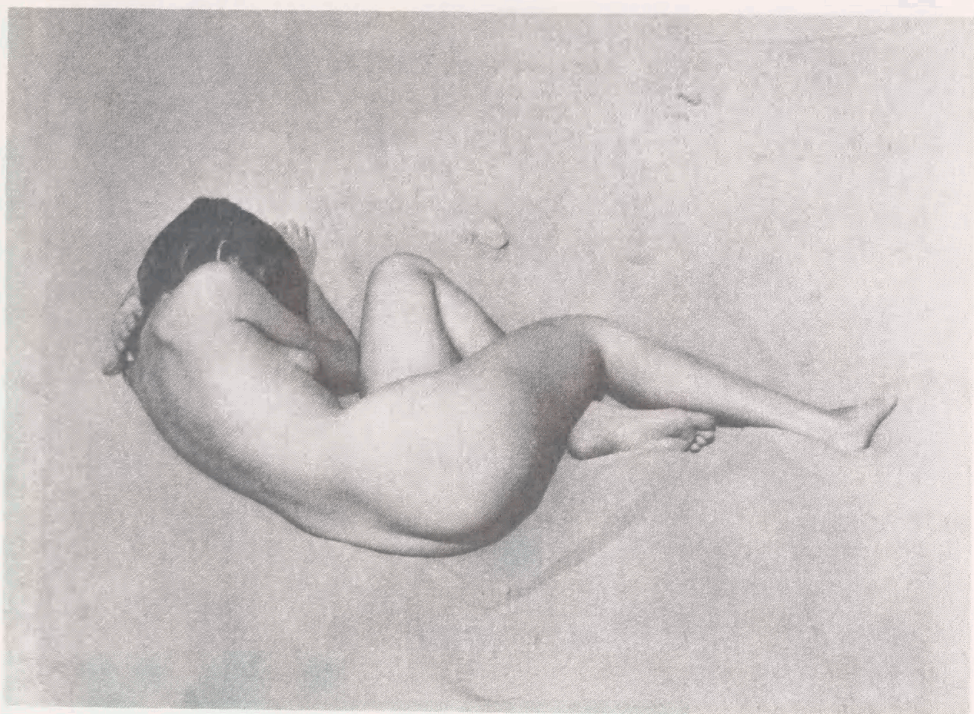
suitable to him, to the object, or the moment, feeling the cause, the life within the outer form. Recording unfelt facts by acquired rule, results in sterile inventory. To see the Thing Itself is essential: the Quintessence revealed direct without the fog of impressionism - the casual noting of a superficial phase, or transitory mood. This then: to photograph a rock, have it look like a rock, but be more than a rock. - Significant presentation - nor interpretation." (citeret efter "The flame of recognition", p. 39).

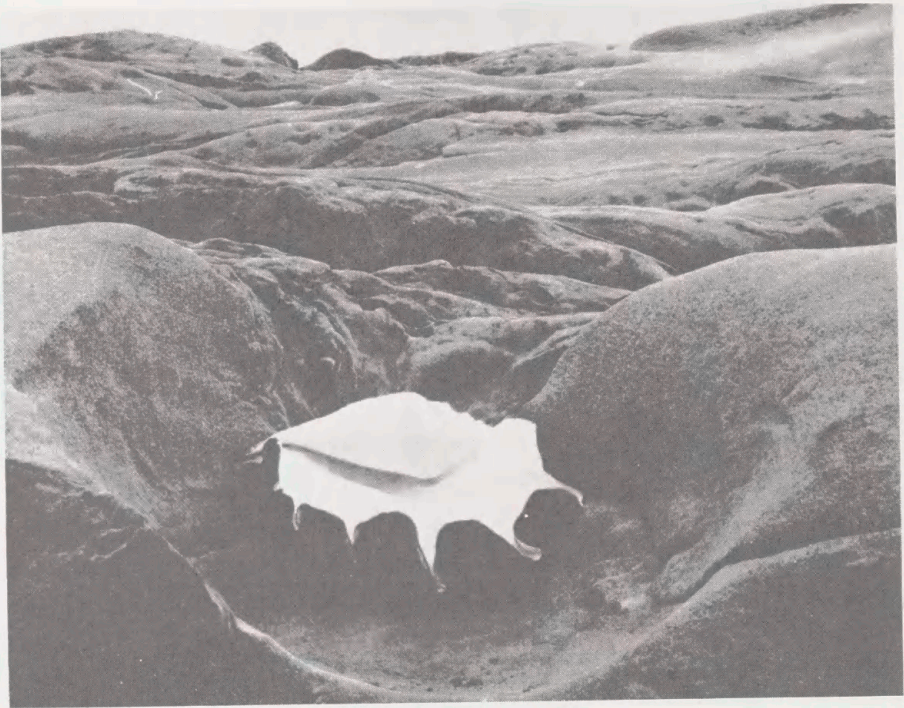
Denne objekt fascination bragte ham til endog at udviske grænsen mellem det personlige og det private: modellerne til hans bedste nøgenbilleder var alle hans elskerinder. Den betydeligste af dem - Charis Wilson - skriver om sit møde med Westons fotografiske kunst, som hun blev dybt betaget af: " My first reaction was one of absolute incredulity. The trees and rocks at Point Lobos - this twisted pile of kelp, that weathered barn - were the stuff of my own backyard. I had been looking at them all my life, but here was evidence that I hadn't really seen them. From my exposure to the Arensberg collection, I was more accustomed to abstraction and symbolism than to realism. It took a while for me to realize that I was responding to the prints in terms of subject matter, as if Edward were merely making statements about things. I knew it wasn't the case, but I had to wait for my mind to stop gasping, "So that's what a pepper looks like!", before I could really begin to see the pictures.

The 4x5 nudes were a special revelation. The only photographic nudes I had previously known were the "Art Poses" to be found on well-equipped newsstands. These were romantic, very misty ladies, dewy makeup on retouched faces, depilated bodies from which all telltale suggestion of real skin had been removed, sitting or standing awkwardly in shadowy boudoir settings. I had always thought they were hilarious. Nothing could have been farther from "Art Poses" than Edward's nudes, and I was fascinated by their strong individuality as body portraits. At first I had the same trouble that I had with the peppers, dead birds, and eroded planks - I couldn't get past the simple amazement at how real they were. Then I began to see the rhythmic patterns, the intensely perceived sculptural forms, the subtle modulation of tone, of which these small, perfect images were composed. And I began to appreciate the originality of the viewpoint that had selected



Modellen til disse billeder, Charis Wilson, skriver om deres tilblivelse ("Nudes", p. 13): "Altogether it was a magical place. The silence and emptiness, the beauty of the wind-sculptured forms, the absence of any living things beside ourselves - all these combined to give me an exhilarating sense of freedom. As soon as the sun warmed things up, I took off my clothes and went diving down a steep slope. When Edward photographed me we were on opposite sides of a small valley in the dunes, but he was considerably higher. This tended to minimize the steepness of the bank that I was on. I was reminded of the childhood game of statues as I kept returning to the top of the bank to relaunch myself, and each slide down ended in a more abandoned position. It is hard to imagine what a balancing trick it was to stay put for an exposure while sliding and rolling down the sandy embankments. I think that the dunes were photographically librating as well. The 8x10 nudes Edward had made on Mesa Road - even that very poetic figure in the doorway - were close in feeling and approach to the Graflex series (et noget mindre, og derfor mindre detailrigt gengivende, negativformat. SR). All the dune nudes were whole figures and in all of them the patterning of the surrounding landscape was an important part of the picture. The nudes to come would follow this lead - no more "bits" and "pieces", only whole people in real places."





just these transitory moments and made them fast against the current of time." ("Nudes", p. 6-7).

At Weston ikke var mindre betaget af hende, fremgår af hans dagbog (vol. 11, p. 283): "December 9, 1934. I have not opened this book for almost 8 months, - and with good reason; I have been too busy, busy living. I notice the last entry was 4-20. On 4-22 a new love came into my life, a most beautiful one, one which will, I believe, stand the test of time. I met C. (Charis Wilson) - a short time before going South on the P.W.A.P. work (...) I left for the south before our paths crossed again. While there a letter from S. said she had a new model for me, one with a beautiful body. It was C. - Poor S. - How ironical. But what happened was inevitable. The first nudes of C. were easily amongst the finest I had done, perhaps the finest. I was definitely interested now, and knew that she knew I was. I felt a response. But I am slow, even when I feel sure, especially if I am deeply moved. I did not wait long before making the second series which was made on April 22, a day to always remember. I knew now what was coming; eyes don't lie and she wore no mask. Even so I opened a bottle of wine to help build up my ego. You



see I really wanted C. hence my hesitation. And I worked with hesitation; photography had a bad second place. I made some eighteen negatives, delaying, always delaying, until at last she lay there below me waiting, holding my eyes with hers. And I was lost and have been ever since. A new and important chapter in my life opened on Sunday afternoon, April 22, 1934."

I godt en halv snes år var hun Weston en kongenial medarbejder og inspirationskilde. Hun har udgivet en del af Westons billeder og skrevet om deres tilblivelse. Westons personlige nybrud inden for figurstudierne (1923) karakteriserer hun med et skarpt blik for deres kvaliteter ("Nudes", p. 9): "They went to Redondo Beach together and had what Edward described in his Daybook as "that last terrific week with her before leaving". It was sometime during that week that Edward made his first really strong nudes. No curtain of sensibility hangs between viewer and subject and there is no idealization. These are pictures of a particular individual, with small, high breasts, distended nipples, moles on her belly, gooseflesh tightening her pores so the fine blond hairs stand out from her skin. This is not the body an "audience" sees, but the body a lover knows." Westons studier af natur-



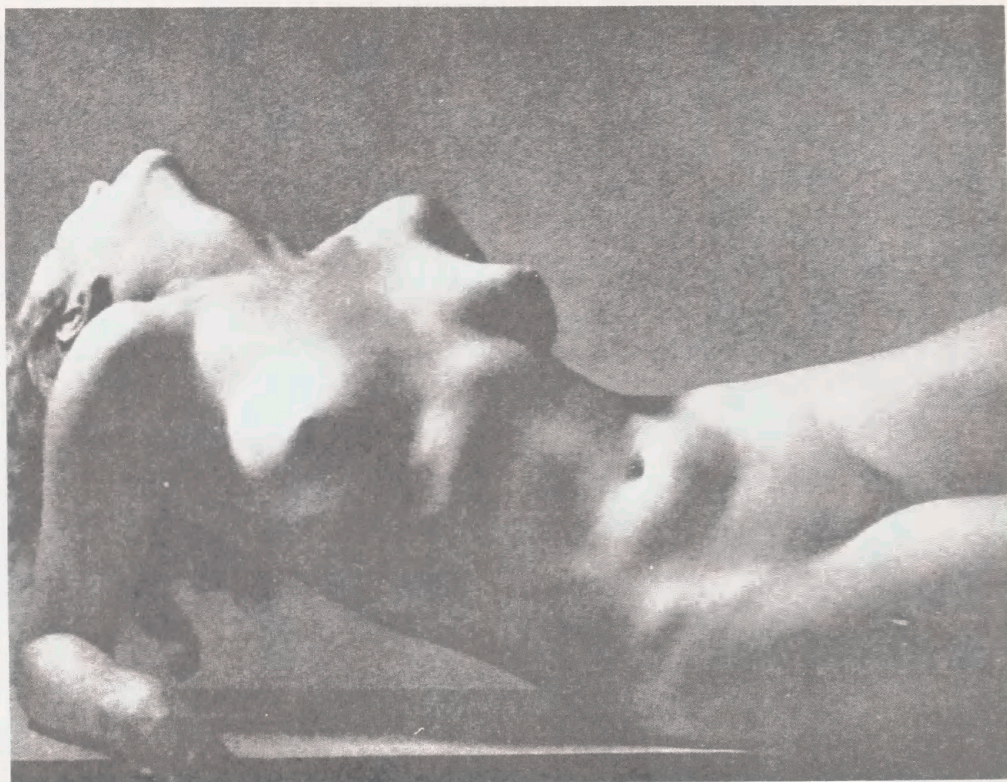
"We climbed a hill, or rounded a turn, and there it would be. You could feel the electricity in the car - the kind of excitement sometimes generated in a gambling casino - and the moment I pulled off the road Edward would be hauling out the tripod, lengthening its legs, and screwing the 8x10 onto it. While his hands performed these mechanical tasks, his eyes kept returning to the critical area: which lens element was needed? What about a filter? Where would he put the camera? All these decisions were made - and often a negative as well - in a couple of minutes. The equipment was big and clumsy, but Edward could work with astonishing speed.

former, især planter og konkylier, afspejler ligeledes hans engagement og fordybelse i formen, i den grad, at han kan til-sidesætte alt andet end den rene æstetik, som i billedet af en død mand i Colorado-ørkenen: "He must have died that day. But whatever aid he got came too late; hunger and privation had wasted his body and the merciless sun had dried him up. But he was quite beautiful in death. I made the enclosed photograph." ("Fifty years", p. 192).



Then came the moment of rest, with Edward always asking - quite unnecessarily - "Do you want to see?" I was so used to looking on the ground glass that I saw the image right-side up, and was as foolishly surprised as Edward to be reminded it wasn't when someone else said, "Why, it's upside down!" I even made some progress toward seeing black and white equivalents instead of the lovely opalescent colors the ground glass showed. "Weston country" I could spot with no difficulty, and often I could narrow down to the general area of the negative; but to see "the real thing" on the ground glass always produced a special kind of surprise. It was as if someone had turned the scene of a picnic into a memorable sonnet right before your eyes". (Charis Wilson i "California and the West", p. 17).

Hans landskaber er udsøgte prospekter, perfekte gengivelser af omhyggeligt udvalgte panoramaer - og kan alligevel bære præg af hans syn, hans person: i sine ypperste billeder kunne han gennem sit valg af motiv, udsnit og eksponeringsøjeblik gøre det objektive subjektivt, den upersonlige natur til selvudtryk.

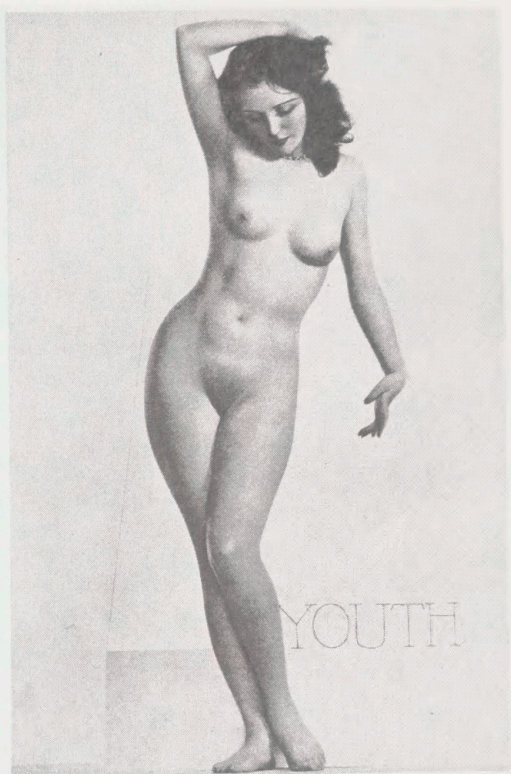


William Mortensen (1897-1965) ville egentlig være kunstmaler efter sin hjemsendelse som soldat efter Første Verdenskrig, men kunne ikke med det skønmalende miljø og blev i stedet fanget af fotografiets grafiske muligheder. Efter nogle år som troligt reproducerende kamerabetjener - og en succesrig karriere som still-fotograf i Hollywood, hvor han havde modeller i tusindvis, heriblandt de fleste af tidens berømteste skuespillere, og hvor han, efter eget udsagn (i "The command to look"), tog tusindvis af fotos, men ikke skabte et eneste billede - satte han sig for at analysere, hvorfor nogle billeder var gode og andre ikke, og nåede frem til det resultat, at den fotografen iboende vilje til form er det afgørende - ikke den objektivitetens maskindjævel, der lurder på enhver, der får kameraindustriens finmekanik i hænde ("Monsters and Madonnas", p. (2)): "This peculiar anomaly of a mechanically dominated art is due to two causes. In the first place, in photography (and in no other art) the scientific element and the expressive element have largely grown up together, and each contributing to the other's development. But photography



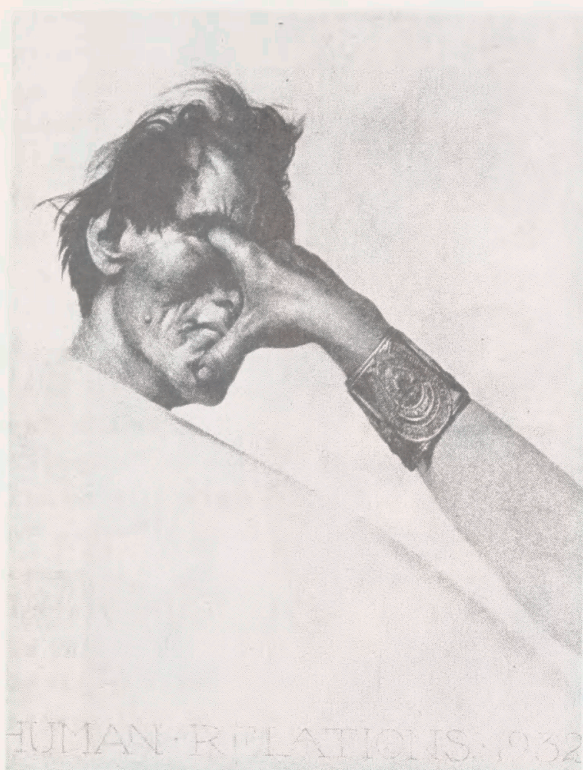
arrived on the scene already weighted down with much irrelevant knowledge. The body of useless erudition has been much expanded by technicians unwilling to relinquish what they consider their prior rights. The second cause of photography's predicament is the unhappy facility with which superficial photographic facts and procedures may be learned. When a man buys a camera, he considers himself ipso facto half a photographer. When he has owned it a week, he considers himself an advanced amateur. When he has owned it a month, he considers himself a photographic authority. In no other art does such a preposterous condition exist." - Resten af hans vittige vejledning i fotografisk djævluddrivelse kan læses p. (2)-(8), under disse to mottoer: "It is working within limits that the artist reveals himself" - Goethe. "You can't fool me. I'm too ignorant" - Joe Penner.

Da der samtidig stak et godt stykke af en Hogarth i ham - "Analysis of beauty" citeres både explicit og implicit af Mortensen - falder hans produktion i to indbyrdes nært forbundne og ofte interaktive afdelinger: en i sit tekniske udtryk højst



subjektiv billedproduktion med tendens til det barokke og - i modsætning til Weston, der ikke producerede sig skriftligt på anden måde end i sine dagbøger - en serie af særdeles jordnære lærebøger i fotografisk teknik i alle aspekter, præget af en egen humor, der ikke sparede ham selv, af analytiske evner og psykologisk fingerspitzengefðhl. Han gik ind for en hvilken som helst manipulation af de fotografiske processer, så længe den blev legitimeret af billedets ide, og for forenkling af remedierne: så få rekvisitter som muligt og så enkelt udstyr som overhovedet gennemførligt. Til gengæld krævede han et maksimum af personligt engagement af fotografen: "The artist must work, must give of himself. An artist who finishes a setting with his respiration, pulse and the part of his hair unaltered, has probably obtained very poor results." (The Model, p. 196).

William Mortensens mål var det omvendte af Edward Westons: den subjektive, personlige sandhed; at en del af hans produktion kom det allegoriske betænkeligt nær, har skygget for hans originale talent som portrætskaber (i samme forstand som en skuespiller,



der skaber en figur af få, rendyrkede karakteristika) og som fintmærkende skildrer af det nøgne legemes på én gang skulpturelle og - i vekslende proportioner, men altid uadskilleligt - erotiske kvaliteter. Modsat Weston opretholder han et skarpt skel mellem det personlige engagement og intimiteten: "Too great intimacy and familiarity between model and artist may prove a source of boredom. Because of too frequent repetition, the sitting becomes for both a matter of uneventful routine. Routine sittings rarely produce anything but routine results. There should be a definite psychological barrier separating the functions of the artist and model, the artist controlling and the model subservient. It is to the advantage of both to preserve the sense of this barrier. So when matters reach a state when the model is able to foresee resignedly every suggestion of the artist, and when the artist finds himself more interested in the model than in the picture - it is time to call quits for awhile (...) At the end of this mutual vacation, they will be able to return to work with renewed interest and their proper relationship re-establi-



shed." (The Model", p. 196-197). - Mortensen var dog ikke selv helt principfast: han giftede sig med sin yndlingsmodel ("Youth").

Over for motivkombinationen figur og landskab, der er central for Weston, har Mortensen reservationer ("The Model", p. 184-85): "A special problem of the expressive qualities of the model is involved in the use of figures in landscape.

Landscape and the human figure are two diverse and different elements. Landscape is largely a matter of mood, and in the

creation of this mood lighting effects are all-important. The human figure, on the other hand, carries formal and personal implications. In the representation of the figure, lighting is secondary and generally exists merely for the sake of visibility.

Because of their diverse nature, landscape and figure cannot function equally in the same picture. One or the other must dominate. And, in any given picture, the artist must be very clear in his own mind, and must make it very clear to the observer, which of the two elements is intended to play the principal role."

Mortensens grundholdning til fotografiet kommer til udtryk i hans fire grundregler for (fotografiske) billedskabere ("Monsters and madonnas", p. (7): (The) exhortation to "get busy on something else" (efter at have gjort sig klart, at det, man har frembragt, er udueligt. SR) might well be taken as the first rule of self-discipline for pictorialists. The immediate need of amateurs is that they know less and do more (...) The second rule for self-discipline is: don't flatter yourself. It is all right to let your friends flatter you, but don't let yourself be puffed up in your own estimation. (...) The third rule is: seek the finer things (...) In the symphony hall, the art gallery, the library, you can learn more of the things that really matter in photography than in all the photographic books and technical manuals. (...) The final rule is: Learn about the art of photography, not in camera clubs, but in silence and solitude. (...) Silence and solitude - and much of both of them - are necessary to the creative worker. In silence he finds peace, and in solitude he finds himself."

- Tager man med Villy Sørensen (Digtere og Dæmoner, 1959) udgangspunkt i, at kriteriet for det fuldbårne kunstværk er den fuldkomne overensstemmelse mellem form og indhold, kan man være tilbøjelig til at mene, at formen er løbet af med Weston, medens indholdet har taget Mortensen - men også, at de, fra hver sin side af idealet, har ydet vægtige bidrag til afklaringen af spørgsmålet om fotografiet som mulig kunstart: en grafisk teknik med sit helt eget, forføreriske særpræg af virkelighedsgengivelse uden menneskelig indblanding.

Denne fotografiets svært forlokkende dæmon må - for at undergå forvandling til inspirationskilde - dyrkes med en Westons ildhu og holdes på afstand med en Mortensens humor.

Litteratur

Biografier og henvisninger til tidsskriftartikler om de to her præsenterede fotografer findes i:

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Mortensen

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Outdoor portraiture : problems of face and figure in natural environment / by William Mortensen. - San Francisco, 1947. - 142 s.:ill.

The paper negative / William Mortensen. - Newport Beach, Ca., 1954. - 33 s.

Pictorial lighting / by William Mortensen. - San Francisco, 1947. - 222 s.:ill.

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