

Richard Rothman



All images *Untitled*, from *Love and Hunger: In the Town of C.*

Richard Rothman is an intense guy. He engages conversation with unusual concentration and attends closely to every utterance. Quick to smile when delighted, he challenges inchoate thought and likely asks questions more penetrating than you’re prepared for. That is, he is a person who treats others with great respect.

In a similar way, he attends the world, but with this addition. His pictures embody Richard’s interactions with the world—that is, his *self*—evidencing an attentiveness to place and person admirable for both its clarity of purpose and its abiding kindness. There is no adequate word for the prints except “exquisite.” They are complete and exhaustive documents of a searching—more, a longing—that is inexhaustible.

All of which is to say that Richard Rothman shows a deep respect for the making of photographs and, by extension, a love for the plain facts of this world.

Like many, I came to know of Richard through his remarkable 2011 book, *Redwood Saw*. A masterful three-act structure places the townspeople of Crescent City, California, between impenetrable old-growth forests and the imponderable Pacific Ocean. Which ocean, as a tsunami, nearly destroyed the town in 1964, and made another serious attempt five years ago. Tenuous existence is a given for us all; for Crescent City, it’s uniquely palpable.

But Richard doesn’t rely on history or geography for meaning. Rather, he enriches the meaning of both through the lived lives of human beings. In *Redwood Saw* and now this new work—*Love and Hunger: In the Town of C*—geography is writ both large and small. “Place” in the immediate sense (where people live and work and love and struggle and eventually succumb) stands on equal footing with place considered grandly as forests and oceans, or—in the pictures you’re looking at—the Rocky Mountains.

For such evenhandedness, the view camera’s lucidity is necessary. At the larger scales (the

ocean, the high plains of Colorado) the description’s precision throughout both the depth and the breadth of the photograph establishes a democracy of vision, both among the group of pictures and, more importantly, within each individual image. This objective approach then shapes how we consider both the shorter-range landscapes and, most crucially, the pictures of people.

I love Richard’s pictures of people. I love that he refuses to extract human beings from their world. I love that he refuses to photograph them as types out of central casting. I love that the light in his pictures falls equally lovingly on human bodies and cars and houseplants and door frames. No thing more important than any other.

I love that little boy’s wondrous rib cage. And his dangling arm. Do you see how these things extend life to the pillowcase’s crease and lend that vacuum cleaner and hose significance? This is the highest example of a photographer’s ability to bring formal coherence to chaos. (Perhaps also a responsibility.)

I love that I don’t fully understand the nudes. The easy read is that we’re all naked and defenseless before time and death. But there’s something deeply enigmatic in these pictures—the dignity that Richard infuses in them, in his specific manner of picture-making and their matter-of-fact placement among images of clothed people—that defies death and bodily decline. Which defiance of time has been the photograph’s hallmark since its invention. In these pictures, a double dose of defiance and refusal to succumb.

Still, there’s no sense that Richard feels he’s solved this thing. He continues to press further, asking the discomfiting question. In the new work, we see a pronounced move towards the deep household interior: the murky shadows of personal space, unknown but made knowable to others by the photographer. When something is knowable, it becomes relatable. When it

becomes relatable, a basis for empathy—for meaningful connection—is born.

Lionel Trilling wrote that Tolstoy’s objectivity was so complete as to become love. While I don’t believe that such objectivity is possible or even desirable in photography, I do believe that Richard Rothman brings such a combination of compassion and intellect (call it a self, as I wish) to a rigorous, clear sighting of the world (call it objectivity, if you wish) that it results in respect so complete as to become love.

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