

Foreword:

The most basic question any photographer has to answer is what to photograph. Since everything is a potential subject and each fraction of a second is a new opportunity to make a photograph, how do you find a place and time that in some way deserve prolonged attention? There are a variety of ways to answer that question, but often the first impulse is to try to find something extraordinary to take a picture of: a time or place unlike any other, one hopes.

Another way to answer the question, the one adopted by Neal Rantoul, is more open and accepting of the world as it presents itself to the camera and his own passage through it. This is not only exemplified by the places he chooses to photograph, which vary from rural to urban, new to old, etc; it is also exemplified by the fact that his serial photographs extend the fraction of one second of a single photograph into a sequence of moments. Each sequence in his *American Series* reveals the great variety of subjects present in any given place or in the time it takes for a short walk.

However, it is not the variety of subjects or the number of photographs within a series that gives these images their character or that makes them so deserving of our attention. It is the power of observation that makes each photograph within a series unique while also contributing to something much greater. Each series unfolds in a way that is similar to the way in which we normally experience a place for the first time. As our gaze and our attention shift from one thing to another we start to collect impressions that merge into a sense of place.

This process does not follow a straight path. Accepting the world as it presents itself to the camera places the burden on the photographer of being able to respond with fresh eyes to what may at first seem commonplace: to be receptive. In his ability to place a frame around each moment of recognition as he passes from place to place Neal Rantoul patiently teases out a sense of place that is drawn from the complex relationships and contrasts he observes.

The resulting sets of images may not be more “true” than another group of images made in the same place might have been, nor do they pretend to be. Each sequence is a personal, nuanced reflection of one person’s passage through a particular place in time.

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