

Charis Wilson Weston

The model, lover, chronicler and wife of photographer Edward Weston reflects on photography then and now.
by Gideon Bosker and Stu Levy

It is as if Leonardo da Vinci has been dead 20 years and you are presented with the opportunity to interview Mona Lisa. Charis Wilson was the subject of many of Edward Weston's most memorable nudes, work many people feel made nude photography a "respectable" enterprise. Wilson made a rare public appearance at the Silver Image Gallery in Seattle recently in conjunction with an exhibition of the pictures and the publication of Edward Weston Nudes (Aperture).

AP: What are you doing now?

CW: Writing and teaching creative writing to senior citizens at Cabrillo (CA) Community College. Eventually there will be a memoir of the Weston years.

AP: Do you feel as if you are living in Weston's shadow?

CW: I'm not sure what that question means. After I left Edward I remarried, had two children and lived in Eureka, California. No one there knew of Edward then, nor, until recently, of my involvement with him. A few years ago Neil and Cole (Weston) published a portfolio of Edward's nudes and I wrote a preamble for that. Then Aperture asked me to write the commentary for the book.

AP: When did you meet Weston?

CW: In 1934. As I said in my reminiscence for the book, his eyes had a wicked gleam as he looked me over. He was 48 and I had just turned 20. What impressed me the most was the sight of someone who was quite evidently twice as alive as anyone else in the room, and whose eyes most likely saw twice as much as anyone else's.

AP: Not long after, Weston asked you to pose for him. What was it like to be photographed nude?

CW: It was great and—shall we say—a rewarding experience. Edward had a strong conviction in his own vision, and this made me feel comfortable. I contributed to his pictures mainly by being good at dancing and moving around. I gave him the raw materials and enjoyed learning how to do that, but it was clearly Edward who orchestrated the pictures. Now, when I see myself in a Weston photo, it's just an incidental piece of information—"Oh, that's me."

AP: How did people react to the nude pictures when they first appeared?

CW: Some took it matter-of-factly, others were horrified. The restrictions, especially by the Post Office, were

much stricter then: "no pubic hair." Half of what is printed today could not have been exhibited or mailed then. It was a real problem for people who bought prints to get them delivered.

AP: Weston's Mexico and California Daybooks are a documentation of his attitudes about photography as well as other events which surrounded his life. Why is there a ten-year gap in the Daybooks? The last entry in 1934 describes you, his new love. The next entry was logged in 1944.

CW: He didn't pause, he just quit and did a postscript. He blamed that on me, which I agree with to some extent.

AP: Why did you and Weston separate after ten years of productive and intense involvement?

CW: The reasons were complex. Our age gap had become more pronounced and many of our interactions consisted of destructive attitudes. It was later that I realized he had Parkinson's disease, and that may have accounted for many of our problems. Had I known of his illness, it might have been different.

AP: When Weston took the first photographs of you, he said: "These are the



best photographs I have ever done." How often did he say that about his photographs?

CW: Fairly often. He leaned toward hyperbole.

AP: What were you feeling at the moment the shutter clicked?

CW: I felt very conscious of being a performer and at the same time knew that it wasn't entirely my performance. Not all photographers and models think this way. I attended a lecture by a photographer who had come to the conclusion that the model has as much to do with the essence of the finished product as the photographer. I don't agree.

AP: There is a striking progression in the nudes of you. Initially there appears to be some trepidation about revealing your face. They are not nearly so powerful as the devouring photographs of your entire torso which make up the Oceana series. Did you and Weston ever reflect upon this transition?

CW: Yes. The change from the 4 x 5 nudes to the Oceana nudes very much reflected the chemistry between Edward and me. When you work with a person on a creative endeavor for a long period of time, you begin to establish a train of events that parallels your personal relationship. However, the most important consideration with Edward was not to repeat things he had already done. Knowing what he wanted consisted of coming up with something new.

AP: Susan Sontag has written: "The peppers Weston photographed in 1929 and 1930 are voluptuous in a way that his female nudes rarely are. Thus, one of the perennial successes of photography has been its strategy of turning living beings into things, things into living beings." How do you react to this?

CW: Much of what Susan Sontag writes is poppycock. I think Edward's nudes are some of the most original things he ever did, and had a tremendous effect upon what came later. These close-ups of body segments are closely related to

what he was doing with vegetables, rocks, roots and other natural objects at Point Lobos. It was a period of very sharp scrutiny of form for its own sake.

AP: In *California and The West*, you write that you could recognize scenery that Weston would respond to, and would stop the car and wake him when "anything with a Weston look appeared." To what extent were you responsible for the pictures?

CW: No more than with the nudes. Edward made his picture, not anyone else's. But there is no question that you can recognize after a while what is interesting, maybe even the slice that was going to interest him the most. I could never previsualize the final product.

AP: What are your photographs like?

CW: You had to ask. Well, I have a very "instamatic" camera that does everything, but usually I forget to bring it with me. If I do remember to take it, I don't remember to take it out and make a picture. If I do manage to get it out, I usually forget to take the lens cap off. If somehow I get that far, there's always a tree growing out of the subject's head.

AP: There is certainly an optimistic quality, a need to beautify, in Weston's work. Was he consciously striving for a depiction of the ideal?

CW: Yes, there are many platonic overtones in some of his ruminations, and he was conscious of his own view of it—the idea that the camera could see more than the eye and, by organizing the elements properly, you could reveal the inner essence of things. You can see this statement over and over again in his photographs.

AP: It's curious that Weston made the statement: "Only with effort can the camera be forced to lie. Basically, it is an honest medium." Yet he admits that many of his photographs bear little resemblance to the subject matter.

CW: Although Edward was no great theoretician, he was always prompting

himself to come up with an explanation for what he was doing. Remember, it may have been (William) Blake who said, "The eyes see more than the heart knows," but it was Edward who commented, "The camera sees more than the eye, so why not make use of it." The important thing is that Edward's words came *after* making the pictures.

AP: Weston's Mexico experience was distinctly different from his others in that he chose to focus his attention on the human element in small Mexican villages—a significant digression from his landscapes, still lifes and nudes. Was he influenced during this period by the social forces that later occupied documentary photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans?

CW: Not really. Actually, the most important thing about Edward's Mexico experience was that he was always on the edge of poverty. He didn't have the money to get around, and expeditions were very carefully rationed. I think if he had lived there more comfortably financially, he would have done other things.

"His eyes most likely saw twice as much as anyone else's."

"Civilian Defense," 1942



"I felt very conscious of being a performer."

AP: His *Daybooks* reveal that he was constantly swinging between love and hate of Mexico; he could never seem to identify himself with the country.

CW: He was never comfortable with the fact that he was a short man with a big camera, and a relatively easy target for anyone who wanted to take after him. One of the last things he did in Mexico was the Pulqueria series, and he was always worried that some drunken Indians or Mexicans might decide he was making fun of them.

AP: Did the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera influence Weston?

CW: He and Diego were good friends for the three years Edward spent in Mexico, and his interest in Edward's work certainly counted for something. Diego said, "Weston must be sick," referring to his photographs of the shells, but then again, Edward was not impressed with Diego as an artist, but liked him primarily as a socializer.

AP: Weston was never moved to do socially conscious photography. Did he

ever see his work in a political context?

CW: No, and he objected violently to people who did that. During the thirties people were doing their best to enlist him on the side of the downtrodden workers, but he would point out that he wasn't that kind of photographer. After all, he wasn't going to have some Salinas lettuce thug bust up him and his camera for the sake of photographing strikers. It was only good sense to leave that to the newsmen.

AP: Wasn't the photograph entitled "Civilian Defense" a form of political commentary?

CW: Well, that picture was as near as Edward got to that kind of work. Fundamentally, I think the contrast between the hideous gas mask and the naked body was his first interest, and the political statement—if any—came second. Nevertheless, "Civilian Defense" was pirated by peace groups in the 1960s and, in fact, turned up as a poster in my niece's girls' school, where they would tease her by shouting: "That's your auntie! That's your auntie!"

AP: Major photographers influenced by Weston include Ansel Adams, Brett Weston and Wynn Bullock. How do you separate what they've done from Edward's influence upon them?

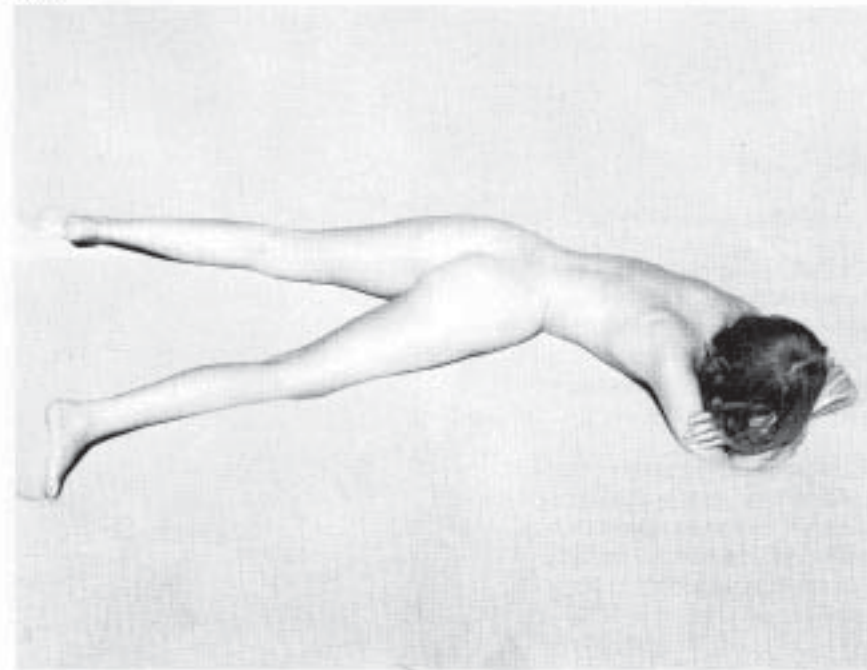
CW: I don't believe one can. Everyone gets influenced by other people, and that's fine. Then again, that's far different from someone who comes along and begins to imitate.

As far as individuals go, I've never gotten very excited about Bullock's things—they're nice and all, but seem a little coldhearted, cerebral perhaps. I attended a lecture given by him and never heard such a load of stuff in my life as he put out about why he was taking pictures. He offered the most complicated ideas about photography which, as far as I could see, had nothing to do with pictures. I think he was getting on this wild verbal merry-go-round because he felt his photography wasn't holding up by itself and needed this to lean on.

AP: Weston's ultimate effect upon photography remains unclear. Sontag feels that the Westonian ideal, "the essentially technical criteria for what makes a good photograph, is now bankrupt." What has replaced it has been a movement "which attempts to liberate photography as an art, from the oppressive standards of technical perfection; to liberate photography from *beauty* too."

CW: Isn't it disgusting—all this recognition. All you have to do is say "photograph" and people come running. I get very impatient with people like John Szarkowski who have promulgated the idea that the accidental photograph is the top bunny, as well as your out-of-focus wife with a palm tree growing out of her ear. This business of trying to find a new bedrock for photography is crazy. The best thing that could happen is for everyone to forget about photography, shut up about it, and go home for 20 years to give a chance for something new to happen. People should stop treating the preliminaries as if they were the main event. ■

1936



Edward Weston (Photographs courtesy of Aperture)

PARTING SHOTS

Ratting On Us

Surely a woman whose beauty was celebrated by Edward Weston deserves better treatment than was given her in the interview with Charis Wilson Weston (Aug.). It was unworthy of *American Photographer* to have published a picture that by its distortion does such injustice to readers who may not know that she is—today—lovely to behold. Make amends. Print another.

Peg Frankel
Elk, CA



This is another picture that was one of Charis's favorites from the portrait session. —Ed.

Blowing Your Nodes

We feel compelled to continue the dialogue begun in "Parting Shots" (Oct.) on the "T&A" photograph of Ms. Hemingway published in August. In our spare time we are known as T&A (Tom and Ann) Photographic and we are gearing up to produce photographs that will appeal to a segment of the population to whom T&A has long meant tonsil and adenoidectomy. We are certain that when men regularly wear clothing from which a "P" can spontaneously pop, "P&A" photos will be published as widely as was Margaux's. Besides, you can't be degraded by the publicizing of your actions if you wear appropriate attire for disco dancing, playing tennis or, for that matter, standing on your head. Thomas McGranahan, MD and Ann McGranahan
Lake Oswego, OR

Seeing Red

The article by Rosella Felsenfeld ("In Camera," Sept.), "Black Eyes Are Shining," almost made me throw up. Why waste a half-page of a serious magazine with this gush on Angela Davis, a Marxist, America-hating ingrate? Charles Hamath
Philadelphia, PA

Vachon Tribute

I especially enjoyed reading Brian Vachon's article on his dad (Oct.). The part where John Vachon visited the white poor in Roxbury, Massachusetts brought a lump to my throat. Is there any chance for us to see some or all of those pictures taken for *Look Magazine*? Bob Saunders
Santa Barbara, CA

Vachon's Look photographs were the property of Cowles Communications, owners of Look. After the magazine ceased publication in 1971, Cowles donated the photographs to the Library of Congress, but limited their subsequent use. It is unlikely that any of Vachon's Look photographs will be published in the near future. Currently these restrictions are a matter of some controversy and that story will appear in AP shortly. —Ed.

What You See Is What You Get

Re: Brenda Lee Reed's letter (Oct.) about your degrading photographs of women, and wishing in turn to "degrade" men, I find it difficult to imagine "degrading" someone by photographing them as they are, and would hope Ms. Reed could develop a better self-image than that she is showing. To paraphrase an old saw, "Degradation is in the eyes of the beholder." Gregory D. Jones
Ward, CO

Latins Are Lousy Libbers

Walter Gomez and I request you leave out the nudes, and give us more scenery. Paula Wiebe
Rivera, Uruguay

Changing Times

When Ms. Chafee notes ("Letter From Colorado," Nov.), "Vanderlip found a small . . . collection" at the Denver Museum in 1978, I was surprised she found any at all. In 1962, when I lived there, the former director of the museum, Otto Carl Bach, consistently refused to let photographs be shown. I am happy for Denver and Miss Vanderlip that things are changing. Slowly, perhaps, but Denver is sort of that way. Arnold Gassan
Athens, OH

Caught Parking

Your November "Assignment" blew it. Michael Sullivan's snapshot is a poor set-up. Maybe his speedometer cable was broken but I suspect that he was parked. Watch it, Mike. Don Payes
Eagle River, AK

And She Can Hit From The Right While Moving Left

What a job Nancy Stevens did profaning every fine thing Cartier-Bresson stands for ("In Search of the Invisible Man," Nov.). Callous, indifferent, paranoid, aggressive; my God, the poor guy was probably black and blue by the time she got through with him. Judging his prints, ignoring his conversation, dragging her friends to his lunch, sneaking his picture. It all sounds like a bad scenario for a Monty Python movie. Nancy Stevens. Didn't she used to coach basketball at Indiana or something? Arthur Bacon
Gainesville, FL

Nearer My God HCB

I enjoyed your essay on Cartier-Bresson (Nov.). I'm fed up with "invented fact" articles posing as factual reporting. Knowing that wonderful devil as I do, your story is nearer to what he is actually like than anything I have read before—I hope many realize it. David Hurn
Tempe, AZ