You would have to have a heart of tin not to recognize this as one of the happiest collections of archival photographs ever assembled.


It may be that I have a heart of tin. Or it may be that this selection of postcards and lithographs is so riddled with complexities, ambiguities and mysteries that I am uncertain as to how to begin addressing them.

First exhibited in 2011 at the International Center of Photography in New York, the images depict one of the few public religious rituals in the US: the tradition of river baptisms. The works on show were largely derived from the collection of Janna Rosenkranz and Jim Linderman. The exhibition focused primarily on river baptisms in the Deep South and Midwest between 1890 and 1920. Upon first perusing the images comprising Take Me To The Water, they reminded me of something altogether more sinister. A hint of that is found in a 2009 publication of the same name, containing photographs of river baptisms and vintage recordings of folk and gospel songs. The reading of one explains, “This song was created to accompany the rite of baptism, but Harriet Tubman used it to communicate to fugitive [slaves] escaping to the North that they be sure to ‘wade in the water’ in order to throw bloodhounds off their scent.”

Jim Linderman mentions in his book that James Allen’s publication Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (2000) inspired him to start collecting images of river baptisms. And this triggered my recollection. Both sets of images show public rituals: one in which a black person is condemned to a gruesome spectacle of a death—usually on the pretext of a perceived or manufactured slight to a white person—while the other documents a life-affirming religious rebirth validated by its very public expression of faith.

This image association leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I also find the marketisation of these public rituals—religious or otherwise—troublesome. Looking into the photographers and publishing companies, I stumbled upon a nascent history of capitalism and tourism. As one correspondent of the cards tells her daughter Louise, “We just got these pictures recently. Mr. Black has had such a demand for them.” But how can one reconcile an often very moving and life-defining experience with cashing in on the moment? Who buys these postcards and for what reason? Susan Sontag in her seminal publication On Photography touches on possible answers. “Photographs will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had. Photographs document sequences of consumption carried on outside the view of family, friends, neighbors” (2005 [1977], p. 4). But proof only works when it is offered up to a willing audience, however, most of the postcards included in this portfolio are left blank. They were never used, never written upon, never sent out. What is the point of undertaking a rite of passage, of witnessing and capturing the spectacle of it, if the experience is not seen and shared?

Alas, the images come alive with words of the sender. Jon is told that “we are in this picture” and it leaves me pondering where exactly the correspondents are in the photograph. Are they about to be dunked in the water by the preacher? Are they standing on the river bank? Are they the ogling tourists? Is it through their words that we get to know them, be they actors or onlookers. Or, in the words of Annie to her cousin “I met Sister Belle Imhoff of Waterloo, Iowa. She said she had met you and I almost felt I had met you when she told me.” It is through Annie’s message that the spectacle finally redeems itself “Wish you could have been there, to receive the spiritual blessings which we cannot express.”

— Text by Karin Bareman
Lucy knows she is caught in an unrelenting ebb of desire. There will be no complementary flow, except perhaps the tears that dampen her pillow. She asks for temperance, and though she receives it, there is no doubt that the yearning for Dr. John remains. When one is not handsome or remarkable, that interminable gasping of Lucy’s dream becomes commonplace. It is a reversal of the melodramatic exhalation of the youth overwhelmed by love. However, this feeling is not at all like drowning. It is rather as if you have never breathed true air. You have only struggled to suck enough sustenance into your lungs from water thickened with algae. You are probably the only person on earth who does not know what air tastes like.

Archetypes have some truth. It is hard to know what Grannan’s models want, what they long for, and what the water that surrounds them wants. Sometimes the water is dirty. It dissolves. Other times, it alludes to baptismal purity, which is itself a transplanting of the body from this world into the spiritual world. The water is wholly present and wholly nostalgic, wishing always to be both here and elsewhere. I might describe the most desirable lover in this way. He is as present and necessary as a life-giving river, and yet I can only split him or redirect him, but never materially alter him like one transplants the Eucharist.

In fact, there is often no transformation in photography. There is only the sullen and daily acceptance that memory brings nothing back to us and that people are not savours or simply bodies that coexist with ours. To quote from Joan Didion, “Time passes. Yes, agreed, a banality, of course time passes” (Didion, Blue Nights, 2011, pp. 66–67).

Didion ultimately comes to the conclusion that it is not so banal. Something about Grannan’s photographs give an impression of a tentative finality, which I know is a problematic fetish, especially within the history of photography. The photograph is said to arrest something forever. Says Roland Barthes, “In the Photograph, the event is never tran- scended for the sake of something else: the Photograph always leads the corpus I need back to the body I see; it is the absolute. Particular, the sovereign Con- tingency, matte and somehow stupid…” (Barthes, Camera Lucida, 1981 [1980], p. 4). Like Didion, Barthes realises that the photograph is anything but stupid, and Grannan must agree. Stupid is an important word, though, one we would use for the lover who tells us it is over or that it never really began, that lover who finally made us feel like a portrait. It is stupid to cling to glamour. It is stupid to want to be an individual and to dissolve into someone else like photographic emulsion. It is stupid to believe that any representation, any kind of effort indeed, can save me, you, or us. It is stupid to make hysterical metaphors in the service of hysterical hopes.

Lauren Berlant sees some value in hysterical hopes, or at least she understands why they hurt so much. “This view of ‘a life’ that unfolds intact within the intimate sphere represses, of course, another fact about it: the unbearable troubles, the disrup- tions and disruptions that make things turn out in unpredicted scenarios…” (Berlant, intemacy 2.000, p. 1). The photograph has always been the privileged vehicle for thinking through such attachments, and we return to photo- graphs when those relationships are broken. But we do not return to photo- graphs for truth, we return to confirm what we want to see or to relieve what we wanted then. Thus tied more to the imagination and less to reality, to pic- ture a life is to picture archetypes and stereotypes of intimacy; there is no way to get out of that. Abigail Solomon-Godeau complicates this assertion. “It may well be that the nature of photographic reproduction is a site of unrequited longing.” Archetypes have some truth, and maybe binaries do too.

— Text by William J. Simmons

An essay on Katy Grannan’s work might run the gamut from the Pre-Raphaelites to Sally Mann or, if you want to get abstract, Roni Horn, whose placid forms recall the embodied but glasslike surfaces of Mystic Lake or Sugar Camp Road. You could discuss documentary photography or tableau photography, or the clichéd “liminal space” so favored by postmodern criticism. You might recall Caravaggio’s Nativiss (1597-1599) as a metaphor for the aspirational photograph. It would be hackneyed to compare Grannan to Diane Arbus or Nan Goldin, so you might return to Julia Margaret Cameron instead.

However, all I can think about is Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Charlotte Bronti’s last novel Villette. Lucy endures some trauma to which we are not privy (which likes to dwell on drowning in a re- curring dream) and becomes a schoolteacher, as do so many bereaved women of the nineteenth-century. She falls in love with the handsome town doctor, Dr. John Graham. But he pays her no mind because she is too plain, and he is too beautiful. So, as do so many bereaved women of the nineteeneighteenth century, and countless people I know today, Lucy feigns love for the first man who will have her—a fellow schoolteacher whose affection takes on the form of resent- ment. Like the photographs of Lucy, it is as aspirational as the rest of us.

Archetypes have some truth.

— Text by William J. Simmons

In order of appearance:
— Carr, Quality Magazine, 1995
— Allen, from the series Mystic Lake, 2004
— Lippard, Surviving View, 1984
— Callinicos, S. 1980 from the series Mystic Lake, 2004
— Abreu, from the series Sugar Camp Road, 2002
— Allen, from the series Mystic Lake, 2004
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— Allen, from the series Mystic Lake, 2004