

The Art of Drawing a Photograph

By Henry Targett

According to Wynn Bullock, “Photography is the process of drawing with light,” and he means this quite literally. In *Seeking Answers: Photographs by Wynn Bullock*, an exhibit at Santa Clara University’s de Saisset Museum, we experience a unique style of photography. Bullock’s images range from beautifully realistic to wildly abstract in this comprehensive collection, which is on display until June 30. Even though most pieces were created over forty years ago, Bullock’s images still seem distinctive and forward thinking. Using techniques uncommon in his time, Bullock uses light to transform shots into emotional and even mysterious experiences.

The exhibit includes around fifty silver gelatin prints, all around six by eight inches. All of Bullock’s small prints in this exhibit are black and white; however they are very vibrant and almost seem colorful in a certain way. Naturalistic images like *Cactus* show Bullock’s use of sharp focus on a near object in contrast with the blur of what is farther away. Shots like these, however, seem somewhat dry in comparison with images that show Bullock’s mastery of using light to capture abstract elements in a piece. *The Shore* shows a dark scene on a moonlit beach where all that can be seen is the sand, rocks and the water. The sand and rocks look strikingly realistic and sharp, but the water looks as if it was painted with a brush. Even though the realistic and abstract elements merge seamlessly, the contrast is clear and elicits a feeling of confusion. If he did not actually paint it, how did he make the water look like that? Bullock intrigues viewers in this way with many of his pieces. *Tree Trunk* is an incredible image that looks like a stunning rock formation that somehow grew in the shape of a tree. The viewer can appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the image, but they cannot explain how it was created. The mystery of how Bullock combines both naturalism and abstraction makes his pieces all the more captivating.

Bullock worked almost exclusively with black and white except for his “Color Light Abstractions,” which are vibrant, colorful prints about three times bigger than the black and white prints. The exhibit features six Color Light Abstractions that add an interesting twist. All arranged on a single wall, these are an unexpected burst of color. While vague shapes might resemble a mountain or clouds over a horizon, these images are completely abstract. Most of them are made up of dark space with bright bursts of light that draw attention. Yellow and orange blend together to make fiery explosions and mixtures of blues and greens might look like precious stones or even stars in the night sky. The Color Light Abstractions express precisely what Bullock meant by “drawing with light,” and show us how photography can create an image unlike any other medium. The nature of photography allows him to include bits of realism, like the way light passes through a water droplet or a pane of glass, that give these pieces an element that could not possibly be created any other way. Just like in his black and whites, the combination of the recognizable and the unknown creates an amazing experience.

Yet another interesting part of the exhibit reveals the process of how Bullock creates images that capture a seemingly impossible mix of realistic objects complemented by light abstractions. Four “before and after” pieces are displayed with descriptions of how Bullock

manipulated original shots to transform them into more meaningful images. A picture of simple concrete pilings looks boring and dirty, but combined with the overlay of a mysterious mist, the pilings look like tall buildings in a city poking out above the clouds. An image of small tide pools becomes infinitely more unusual when the negative of the image is upside down, creating a picture of water that seems to have collected on peaks rather than in valleys. Seeing Bullock's process allows his art to be further appreciated because he shows us just how much difference his carefully chosen additions really make.

Wynn Bullock's art takes what we know and shows it to us in a way we have never seen before. *Seeking Answers* displays Bullock's full range of ability, from his mastery of capturing nature to his ability to "draw with light." He skillfully blends naturalism and abstraction to create an experience that may be uncomfortable, but will always be fascinating.