

## Uncovering Unnoticed Beauty

By Ryan Suttle

Located in the heart of the strikingly beautiful Santa Clara University campus, the de Saisset Museum holds a number of captivatingly enchanting exhibits; including one display by Wynn Bullock. Widely recognized for his breakthroughs in photographic techniques, Bullock helps pave the way for today's photographers to explore inventive and stimulating avenues of the art. This particular exhibit, made up solely of works Bullock which span several decades during the 1900s, is titled *Seeking Answers* and can be enjoyed until June 30<sup>th</sup>. The collection provokes questions from within the very fiber of its viewers, causing them to observe their life and their own surroundings in a completely new way. Bullock's method of capturing photographs, his unique grace and flair, produces an effect that is truly incredible to experience firsthand.

This collection of Bullock's photos largely consists of lush natural landscapes, hurriedly abandoned dwellings, and serene marine scenery; the majority of which are in black and white. In conformity with the title of the exhibit, each of these works seems to be taken in an inquisitive manner, filled with wonder and curiosity. One of the most powerful of Bullock's works is titled *Burnt Chair*, and as one might accurately guess from the title, this particular gelatin silver print depicts a chair that has been all but completely incinerated. The chair, now reduced to an assemblage of two of the four original legs, a fraction of the backrest, and a couple of support beams, leans crookedly against a wooden wall. The wall is charred and scaly, and the viewer can almost feel the coarse and grainy texture of the damaged wooden beams. Burnt fragments of what was once a chair sprinkle the floor around the two remaining legs, a testament to the blaze that passed through the room. However, in the midst of this destruction, the chair appears oddly beautiful. Disfigured and separated from its everyday form, it can be seen in a new perspective. The craftsmanship in the detailing and the slight, delicate curvature of the legs gives the chair a soft feeling which would otherwise have gone unnoticed. This rediscovery of beauty in an apparently average object kindles a fire within the viewers, inspiring them to reevaluate the way that they perceive everyday life.

Many of the other works in this exhibit serve the same purpose of revealing the beautiful and extraordinary aspects of things that may have otherwise been overlooked or classified as ordinary. Bullock explains this in his own words, saying that "Instead of using the camera only to reproduce objects, I wanted to use it to make what is invisible to the eye – visible" (Bullock). By manipulating light, or altering the developing process in order to generate innovative and sometimes perplexing effects, Bullock exposes beauty which would have otherwise been undetectable to the viewer.

Some pictures, such as *Offshore* and *In the Surf*, are merely positive and negative versions of each other; however, each version is considered a finished work. Although they are both portrayals of the same exact scene, they have drastically different tones. The predominantly dark negative image radiates a sense of unease and discomfort, while the predominantly white positive image depicts a scene of ethereal wonder. It takes a few moments to realize that these two photographs are indeed of the same landscape because of the major discrepancy in tone between the two, highlighting the perspective altering effect that comes from viewing an object in a new light. The images are radically different, but nearly identical at the same time. Through the juxtaposition of these two photographs, Bullock reveals a glimpse of the answer he seeks. He tries to show that a change in perspective, even in a small way, can drastically alter the way in which people perceive the world around them.

Another method Bullock exploits to evoke a response within the viewer, specifically on *Point Lobos Tide Pools*, is inverting the image. This particular gelatin silver print depicts a group of tide pools; however, the image is flipped upside down and inside out. It is oriented as if the water level is higher than the rocks, giving the impression that viscous pools of solid rock have congregated in between shimmering plateaus and ridges made of water. At first, this point of view is highly disorienting. The viewer feels uncomfortable, trying desperately to reconcile this impossible reality with the universe that he or she is familiar with. This process of questioning the scene depicted in the photograph leads to closer examination of everyday objects and situations, which in turn leads to revealing beauty in places one would never expect to look.

This is the true value behind Bullock's work. *Seeking Answers* encourages the viewer not only to ask questions of the photographs themselves, but to search for magnificence in places otherwise thought of as dull or simple. Inspiring people to observe their lives and surroundings in new ways, this particular collection of photographs inspires viewers to search for what is beautiful in commonplace objects. This process ultimately makes one's life significantly more satisfying and enjoyable, and adds pleasure to even the most ordinary objects. Demonstrating his own belief in the importance of viewing the world with an open mind, Bullock cautions that "if a person stops searching, he stops living" (Bullock).

#### Works Cited

"De Saisset Museum." *The at Santa Clara University*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2013.