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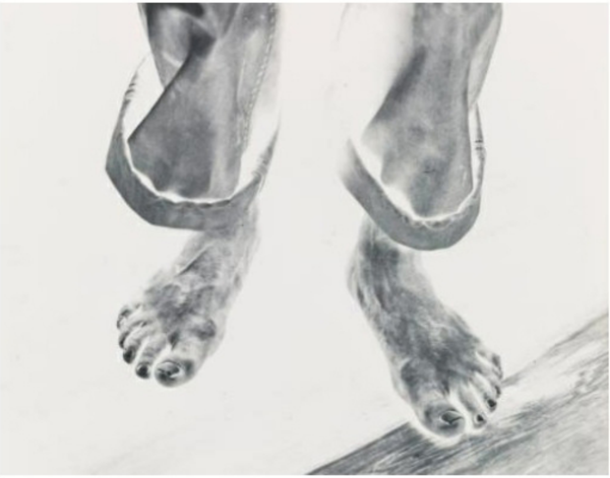
Select Contemporary and Vintage Photography

THE VOICE OF THE PRINT

Minor White
Walter Chappell
Paul Caponigro

The Camera Records Superbly, it Transforms Better.
Minor White

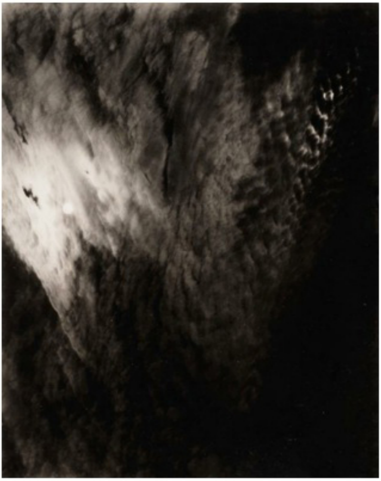


Minor White (1908 - 1976)
Feet, Tom Murphy, San Francisco, California (From Amputations), 1947

Photography's evolution away from concrete or discrete subject matter was inevitable as it developed as an art form. Begun in the 1940s, and flourishing during the Post War years, the Abstract Expressionist movement in painting, with its emphasis on the spontaneous and subconscious creations, took hold in America. Artists such as Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Clifford Still, and Mark Rothko promoted the anti-figurative aesthetic that philosophically resonates with the tenants of the Bauhaus.

From 1938 to 1946 The New Bauhaus/Institute of Design in Chicago, headed by Laszlo Maholy Nagy, continued their aesthetic approach in America that stressed the importance of design and the integration of a variety of subject areas. Teachers and students such as György Kepes, Nathan Lerner, Arthur Siegel, Harry Callahan, and Aaron Siskind, began to produce photographs with the emphasis on the design elements of shape and form, tone and texture, rather than concrete subject matter.

Alfred Stieglitz, who dedicated his life to photography's acceptance as an art form, while promoting the works of other artists in his historical New York galleries, was a pioneering photographer himself. From 1925 to 1934 he produced a series of photographs entitled, *Equivalents*. These 4 x 5" photographs are recognized as the first photographic images intended to be free of subject matter and literal interpretation. Many consider them to be the first completely abstract photographic works of art.



Alfred Stieglitz (1864 - 1946)
Equivalent, Series XX No. 9, [226 B], 1929

We opened our gallery in 1980, in the living room of a small house in the Historic Guadalupe Barrio in Santa Fe. The 1000 square foot house had a main bedroom that served as our darkroom, and a living room, which was the gallery. The rear of the house had two small bedrooms, one for Janet and I, one for our children, Jon and Andra, and a kitchen. Yes, it was tight, but our lives were such that our family and our own photography were our priorities. The gallery endeavor came out of our passion for photography and a real need in Santa Fe. After about a year or so, a neighbor, a working artist with two children the same ages as ours, offered us a rental house next to theirs if we would share child responsibilities. This was an incredible arrangement that has lasted to these days. It gave us all a little extra time and the benefits of an extended family.

This arrangement permitted us to devote our house fully to the gallery and our photography while living down the street. Paul Caponigro lived around the corner, and a year later Walter Chappell moved next door. Getting to know both of them was a gift and life-changing. I don't think there was ever a time that was spent with Walter that we didn't learn something significant about life, nor was there a time spent with Paul that we didn't learn about seeing. And, through both of them, we gained insights into their teacher, Minor White. These three artists shaped much of our attitudes toward our own photography and collecting. Minor White's philosophy has remained a guiding mantra for us:

One does not photograph something simply for 'what it is', but 'for what else it is.

Minor White (1908 - 1976)
Bird Lime & Surf, Point Lobos, California, 1951

Minor White (1908 - 1976)

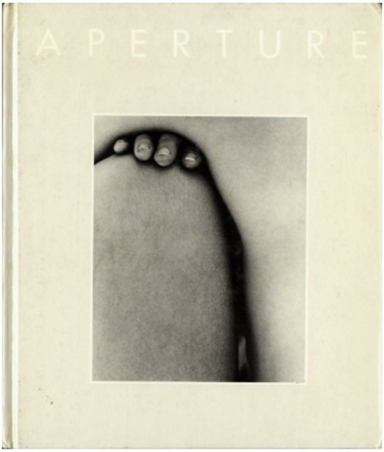
Minor White, after serving in World War II moved to New York City, spending two years studying aesthetics and art history at Columbia University under Meyer Shapiro. His friendship with a circle of influential photographers including Alfred Stieglitz, Edward

Weston, Ansel Adams, and Walter Chappell was instrumental in his artistic development. Hearing Stieglitz's idea of "*Equivalents*" from the master himself was crucial to his post-war work and his own developing philosophies about imagery and what constitutes subject matter. His statement that *"I don't photograph things for what they are, but for* what else *they are"* articulates his approach. His photographic works, his teachings, and writings opened up a new understanding of photography as an "interpretive medium", one capable of expressing our innermost thoughts and feelings rather than a medium for record making.

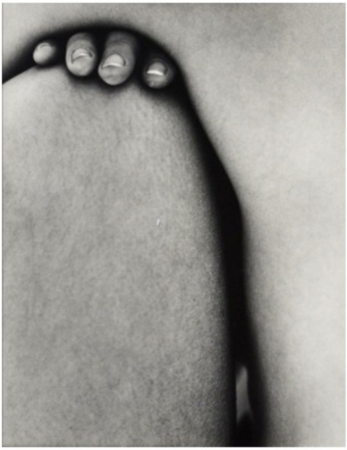
White taught for many years at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), at the Rochester Institute of Technology, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as well as at many public and private workshops. One of the founders, in 1952, of the influential photographic publication Aperture, he served as publisher-editor until 1975. White produced a large body of writing both published and unpublished. His photographs were unmanipulated and often realistic - what they signified was always as important to him as their formal composition. In exhibitions and publications, he freely used his work and that of others in a lifelong journey of self-exploration.

We highly recommend you read Minor White's publication *Mirrors, Messages and Manifestations* published by Aperture, one of the most important books in our library.

Walter Chappell (1925 - 2000)



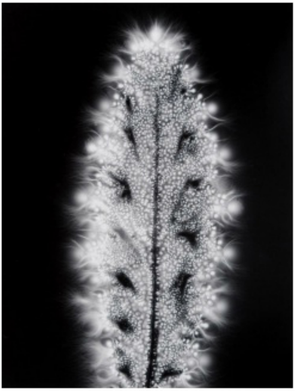
Cover: Aperture Number 79, 1977



Walter Chappell (1925 - 2000)
Nude Armpit, Wingdale, New York, 1962

Following his military service, Walter Chappell moved to San Francisco in 1947 and resumed his friendship with Minor White whom he had met some years earlier in Portland, Oregon. His main pursuits at the time were music, painting, and writing. In 1952 he attended The Frank Lloyd Wright Taliesin Fellowship in Arizona. Following his residence at Taliesin, recuperating from several years of illness due to Tuberculosis, Chappell moved in 1957 to Rochester, New York, to begin a serious study of photography with Minor White. Chappell not only adapted Minor's teachings, but their shared philosophies about the mind and other levels of consciousness manifested in his photographic works culminating in his development and use of electricity to produce his unique and highly regarded "*Metaflora*" photographs.

Minor White (1908 - 1976)
Essence of Boat, Lanesville, Massachusetts, 1967



Walter Chappell (1925 - 2000)
Milk Thistle, 1974

Both Minor White and Walter Chappell photographed using wavelengths of light that cannot be seen by the human eye. Minor worked with infrared film and Walter produced imagery with electricity. Both Minor's infrared photographs and Walter's "Metaflora" photographs should be understood as metaphor in their search to access other levels of consciousness.

Soon after we opened our gallery we heard through Dick Thibodeau, a wonderful man who ran a motel/hostel and was our single source of archival mat board, that the photographer Walter Chappell was living in Northern New Mexico. Dick was willing to arrange a meeting for us with Walter at the motel in the beautiful village of Pilar, on the Rio Grande.

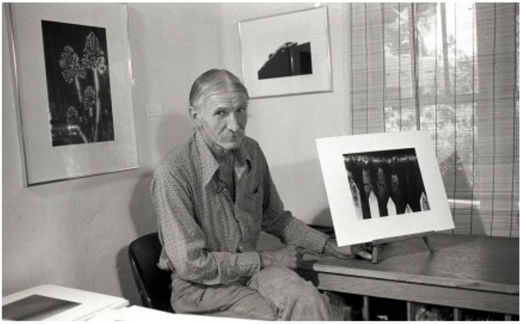
Having known the work of Walter Chappell, mostly through past issues of Aperture Magazine and by reputation, we were amazed to hear that somebody of his renown and stature within the photography world was living so close to Santa Fe and it seemed that this was not common knowledge. With excitement, we made our trip up to Pilar to meet with Walter for an afternoon. Entering a darkened motel room, work laid out on the bed, we immediately felt Walter's intensity, kindness, and deep spiritual nature. Of course, this carried through to the photographs he showed us - the stories he told and the conversations that began that afternoon and spanned approximately the next 30 years.

From that day forward there was never a moment that we spent with Walter that wasn't both challenging and in many ways, enlightening at the same time. There are many stories written and told about Walter's unique lifestyle and chosen approaches to living. But beyond all the related narratives, it must be said that Walter stands out as one of the 20th century's important photographers. From his innovative and groundbreaking works dealing with the human form in the '50s through the spiritually charged Metaflora images, Walter was always pushing the boundaries of photographic "seeing".

Walter Chappell (1925 - 2000)
Cabbage, 1962

Walter Chappell (1925 - 2000)
Fern, 1974

One of our greatest experiences as gallerists was sequencing the photographs for an exhibition of Walter's work. It is said that one of the definitions of great art is that it can both transcend time and subject matter. This was true for Walter's work. We were amazed on that afternoon that photographs as varied as nudes, water studies, rock abstractions, and Metaflora's hung seamlessly irrespective of dates or subjects. His vision, like his life, is both unique and transcendent. We were fortunate to have counted Walter as a friend and colleague.

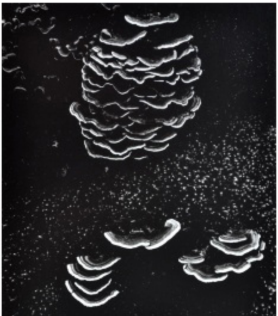


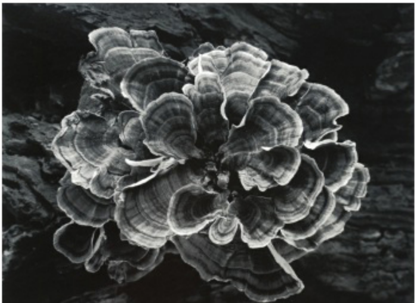
David Scheinbaum (b. 1951)
Walter Chappell at Scheinbaum & Russek Ltd, 1983

My last conversation with Walter was from his hospital bed after having suffered a stroke. Asking how he was and if he needed anything he began to describe, in his words, what an amazing journey he was experiencing. For in the past few days he went from limited movement from the effects of the stroke to his body slowly coming back to life, moving a finger or toe. Only Walter could describe the experience of a stroke as a metaphysical wonder and a mind-expanding experience. His words were beautiful as was his soul.

Paul Caponigro (b. 1932)

Photography is a medium, a language, through which I might come to experience directly, live more closely with, the interaction between myself and nature."
Paul Caponigro





Minor White (1908 - 1976)
Shelf Fungus, California, 1951

Paul Caponigro (b. 1932)
Fungus, Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1962

Paul Caponigro blends a spiritual sensibility to all his images with a mastery of printing. Paul studied with Minor White in the late 1950s, and as many students of Minor's found, his teachings were both inspirational and challenging, looking deeper into oneself to find your own vision or to look deeper into each subject for its emotional and literal content.

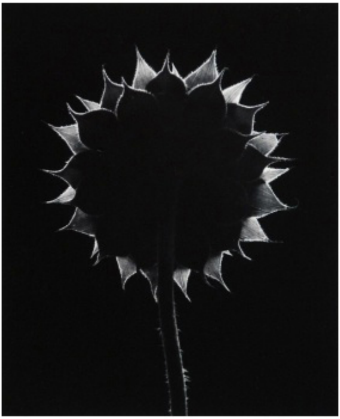
Mystery infuses his images, whether of New England's dark woodlands, the brooding megaliths and Celtic stone crosses of Britain and Ireland, or desert landscapes in the Southwest transfigured by the sun. He states,

"*At the root of creativity is an impulse to understand, to make sense of random and often unrelated details. For me, photography provides an intersection of time, space, light, and emotional stance. One needs to be still enough, observant enough, and aware enough to recognize the life of the materials, to be able to 'hear through the eyes'.*"

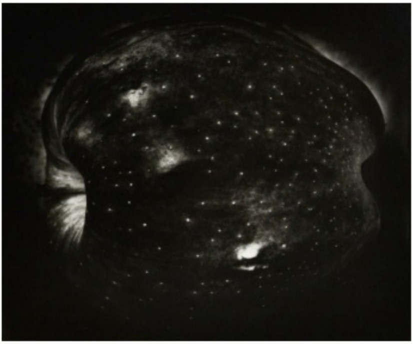
Paul Caponigro (b. 1932)
Revere Beach Sand, 1958

Janet, in her work cataloging Eliot Porter's prints, discovered a large body of work on the Southwest, all done with an 8 x 10" in the mid-1940s to the 1950s. This work was published, *Eliot Porter's Southwest*, 1984. In order to publish the book and an accompanying exhibition, prints had to be made. Eliot, not wanting to convert his darkroom back from dye-transfer to the printing of black and white asked me if I would print this early work. I agreed. At the time I felt I was well trained and experienced in the darkroom and was only slightly intimidated. However, after reviewing a number of Eliot's negative envelopes, I realized that he pretty much designed a different developer for each image! I had no experience making my own developers and was only peripherally familiar with chemistry. Eliot listed the names of the chemicals used for each negative but cryptic notes regarding the quantities. He printed using his eyes! - not scales nor clocks. I called around to photographers I knew asking for assistance preparing my own formulas. Most photographers were using packaged developers, as I was. When I called Paul explaining my dilemma, he said, "come over tomorrow".

All the chemicals that Eliot had notated were in bottles on Paul's darkroom shelves. He printed that morning with me demonstrating how to use each chemical additive and the visual effects and how they affected tonally. This way of printing was an epiphany for me and an approach I spent years sharing with my own students. I don't think there was another photographer alive who not only had the technical knowledge but the visual sensitivity to approach each image individually and create a developer that reinforces the interpretation of the subject. This approach takes photography from a medium for "recording" to one of "transforming".



Paul Caponigro (b. 1932)
Backlit Sunflower, Winthrop, Massachusetts, 1965



Paul Caponigro (b. 1932)
Apple, New York City, 1964

In this excerpt from an exhibition catalogue *The Voice of the Print*, by Paul Caponigro, 1990, he states his philosophy and approach to fine print making. Although lengthy, it is one of the few pieces I know of that puts the photographer in the mindset of crafting a fine art print.

...It became evident to me that true craft demands the incorporation of attitude and feeling in order to carry the work beyond technological accuracy or predictability. The expressive print requires more depth than dazzle and can only be artistically effective if that soft-edge dimension of emotion is united with the hard-edged mechanical concerns. Efforts based solely on sensitometric accuracy hinder the silver laden emulsions from absorbing and ultimately reflecting that pliant, mysterious, and lyrical element of emotion. Excessive dwelling on control in order to achieve superlatively predictable results can be a barrier to allowing poetic force into the silver mirror of the print. Once the vagaries of the medium have been understood, the plotting of curves and the "stacking" of tonal values within the two-dimensional surface of a print must allow for the depth of a Three Dimensional Zone System. Technique must serve and not dominate a craft which requires creative movement. When the tools are grasped, they must be kept on the reins of good judgment and assist the emotional aspect of the process. Harmony and vitality will not result in a print if all factors of the process are not balanced. For me, the craft of photography is often like the ugly duckling awaiting maturity.

Tonal color, scale, and contrast in a black-and-white print should be simultaneously observed and applied in such a way as to discover their unique functions within each individual image. The limiting method of mastering and remaining with only one film, paper, and developer should be expanded by experimenting with a variety of materials whereby one can create a "palette" within the silver realm. Predictability can easily lead to uniformity and boredom; frequent experimentation, with discernment and attention, will encourage the elements of surprise, discovery and variety.

Throughout my career it has been my wish to study and share the beauty and power of the natural world. In my own work I have found it necessary to offer a variety of silver materials and methods of printing in order to effectively capture The Mother's moods. The work has always been easy because of my love of craft; it has been the overcoming of the inertia and gravity of facile results which was usually the more difficult task. Many will approach these photographic images with a preconceived notion of what they should be, or will add their own personal interpretations, or will see only the literal aspects of the print. In breaking away from preconceptions and approaching the show with an open mind and heart, there is the possibility of allowing the prints to speak for themselves, and one might also become aware of suggestions whispered by the interaction of tonalities within each print. It is a silent realm worth exploring.

It is my hope that the viewer might see the potential of experiencing the photograph not only as a record, nor as a means of psychological probing, but as a tool to activate the deeper imagination accessible through the participation of pristine emotion. Allow the voice of the print to speak to you by seeing the tonalities as areas of feeling, quietly or vigorously interacting and functioning as more than mere translations of light reflecting from the surfaces of objects.

In today's video, we hear from Paul in his own words. As with Minor and Walter, Life and Art are inseparable.

We again want to thank you for the feedback. Your emails and calls mean the world to us and continue to motivate. We have had some wonderful responses.

Many of you have also asked about accessing our previous emails. We have added a new page on our website entitled "History of Photography". All our past and future weekly mailings will be located there for viewing. Please feel free to share them and encourage interested parties to join our mailing list under "contact".

Thank you, please stay safe, healthy, productive, and involved.

Please visit our website **www.photographydealers.com** to view our current inventory.