

ON THE COVER

Shadows Inside Sydney Opera House by Michael Roberts

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the photographer on July 11, 2023.

Architecture involves hard surfaces such as metal, concrete, and glass, creating spaces with lines and angles and occasional curves as a welcome change. Yet the presence and absence of light can soften the structure of a building, yielding images and provoking moods. At least this is what photographer and psychologist Roberts was looking for in our cover piece. He was in Australia, touring the Sydney Opera House. It was late afternoon, and slanting bands of shadow and sun stopped him on the stairs, turning a physical passage into an impression worth capturing. There is, perhaps, something about shadow that hints at mystery, even in a setting as well-known as a public building.

In any case, his approach to taking the picture selected for our cover is a story in its own right. Roberts eschewed digital photography and sophisticated equipment in favor of using a decidedly low-tech plastic camera. Yes, a plastic camera with a plastic lens and old-fashioned film. Relatively inexpensive, with names like “Holga” and “Diana,” these cameras have technical limits in resolution and fidelity that actually underpin their appeal. He finds contemporary digital photography “overly sharp,” accurate in reproducing a scene but missing something essential. The slightly blurred focus, grainy quality, and washed-out shading and color of plastic camera photos convey a sense of nostalgia, moodiness, and historical “feel” that he enjoys. These cameras also allow for double exposures, superimposing one image on the next, another feature that offers opportunities for playful creation. At the same time, the rudimentary equipment slows down the whole picture-making enterprise. Film has to be sent out for processing, and patience is needed because prints are not available right away. The photographer must wait, an unpleasant requirement for many people.

None of this is to say that Roberts is an untutored neophyte divorced from, or not conversant with, the evolution and application of standard photographic techniques. His father was an academic engineer, and his mother was a science and technology writer. But both parents were also part-time professional photographers who completed picture-taking assignments during their undergraduate years and later when not engaged in teaching and research. They enlisted their son in this sideline to the point where Roberts felt, in his own words, “predestined to photography.” He “grew up in a darkroom,” learning the craft involved in developing film and

making prints. Roberts recalls his parents’ stories and events that reflected the time and place and photography’s role in documenting social life and change. His father told him how Thurgood Marshall, the great civil rights jurist and first African American Supreme Court justice, came to Oklahoma City to argue the case of Ada Lois Sipuel. She had been denied admission to law school because of racial segregation statutes. The *Oklahoma Black Dispatch* newspaper was eager to document with pictures of the hearing and her powerful legal team. True to local strictures, however, Black photographers were excluded from the venue. Hence, the *Dispatch* hired Roberts’s father for the assignment, which he duly carried out, witnessing Marshall’s courtroom brilliance in the process. Sipuel was eventually successful, and it is fitting that negatives of the photos were later donated to the University of Oklahoma archives, the same law school that had denied her admission.

Roberts is passionate about plastic cameras, even though he still uses standard equipment as well as his smartphone to take pictures. It is the “smaller parts” and details of shadow and light, often in unusual places, that stir his interest. For example, during a visit to the Eiffel Tower, it was the internal assemblage of cables and pulleys that struck his photographer’s eye rather than the stereotypic views familiar to tourists. Put another way, he seeks artistry in everyday things, especially those usually missed or ignored.

Taking pictures is a pursuit that parallels Roberts’s long and distinguished academic career in pediatric and clinical child psychology. Now emeritus at the University of Kansas, he describes his orientation as behavioral and “not very interpretive.” And yet, asked whether a photograph should simply record “something that is there” or interpret, modify, and play with what is there, he endorses the second aim. Perhaps it is his photography more than academic and clinical work that provides an expression for this playful, creative inclination.

Finally, there may be irony in selecting a cover image produced by a photographic method that runs so contrary to the current trend toward digital technology. The irony, however, emerges not from the appearance of the image but from the means of its creation, a reminder to question the obvious—not a bad guide for any discussion of ideas.

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