

Eric Lindbloom and the Photographs

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Eric Lindbloom and his wife, the poet Nancy Willard, were walking through one of the more rural areas of Poughkeepsie, New York, early last fall, looking for the path that would lead to a patch of paradise called "Peach Hill." A few years ago, Lindbloom had made some photographs of it: expansive panoramics, whose horizontal format seems, like hieroglyphic narratives or Medieval tapestries, to encapsulate time as well as to edit space. He has been living in and exploring the environs of Poughkeepsie since 1963, when he began to work as a designer of computer automation systems. Willard joined him in 1965, when she arrived to teach in the English department at Vassar College. It took well over three decades for them to learn about the existence of "Peach Hill," a great, sprawling, commercial apple orchard of spectacular springtime beauty, which is located within town limits. They first heard of it by chance, at a party, during the early 1990s; Lindbloom made his picture of it in 1995. The ephemeral way he saw it is heightened by his sober perspective on the locality, whose terrain he has come to know rather well in the course of photographing other rural and semi-rural areas of the surrounding Hudson River valley.

Lindbloom began to photograph the area with a view camera in 1969, while he was first studying photography with Paul Caponigro. In 1987, he left the computer world to make photographs full time. Since 1990, he has photographed the valley principally with the panoramic, which yields rich descriptive detail. He has felt a certain responsibility to bear witness to the region's last remaining pastoral enclaves, having seen first-hand how many have been prey to environmental predations, occasioned by commercial expansion and other forms of human carelessness. "This is a kind of oasis," he observes while walking. "Dutchess County south of Poughkeepsie has largely fallen to mindless development."

At last, the couple find the way into "Peach Hill." The apples are plentiful and, in Willard's words, "like quince, they're so green." Some boughs are bent to the ground with the weight of their fruit. Lindbloom's panoramic is a Japanese Widelux. When he intends to take what amounts to a formal portrait of the landscape, he mounts the camera on a tripod. The shutter is closed down and set at the speed of one-eighth of a second for maximum detail.

"I shouldn't be hand-holding it," he says. He's working to frame an apple crate that he spots through the trees. This wide-angle snapshot is, for him, a sketch—in *aide-memoire*—for a possible tripod picture. He frequently goes on walks through the countryside, prowling for photographic sketches. Sometimes, he doesn't come away with a photograph immediately, nor even a sketch. For both Lindbloom and Willard, images are dear; their making is an act somewhere between magic and blessing. Although they enter into the process freely and easily, they do not do so lightly. For Willard, this is true whether she is at work on a poem, a novel, an essay, a children's book, a soft sculpture, a collage, or a painting. For Lindbloom, the sense of responsibility to his subject, his instrument, and his materials permeates every part of the photographic process, from the decision to take a picture at all through his painstaking technique in the darkroom, that, like Willard's study, is located on the second floor of their home.

"I feel human presence all around," says Eric, "but I don't see it, only packing crates and apples." Willard has also brought a camera, an Olympus. She directs Lindbloom to stand still for a moment so she can take his picture. "I'm going to break every rule," she says merrily. In fact, Willard's own snapshots are very good. They are taken spontaneously, almost giddily, sometimes, in quite a different spirit from her husband's, and they usually focus on people. To find in her work a sense similar to his of ineffable presences haunting the real world, one has to go to her writing.

The two met in college, at the University of Michigan, where Willard was already something of a star as a poet. Having grown up in Ann Arbor, the daughter of a chemist on the faculty, she published her first poem at the age of nine, and, at the university, was recognized as an outstanding writer immediately, winning—as a freshman—the Avery Hopwood Award in Writing, a prize open to graduate students as well as undergraduates. Lindbloom grew up in Detroit. When he was twelve, a favorite aunt gave him a Brownie box camera, which he used to make scenes of the River Rouge. The set included a little contact printer, and he still recalls the odors of the chemicals and how he put marbles in the bottles so the fluids wouldn't oxidize. For a while, other interests took precedence. At the University of Michigan he took writing classes, intending to be a writer or a journalist. Then, for a summer as an undergraduate, he went out to Stanford to write—and didn't. Instead, he read voraciously, and he came to a dramatic decision to switch his major from English to philosophy and to become a teacher. After graduation, he tried a year in the graduate philosophy program at Berkeley, but he ended up returning to a teaching fellowship, and what he terms a "monastic retreat" at Michigan, where, even though he passed his preliminaries for the doctorate, he

never completed his thesis, "an analysis of Sartre's notion of human freedom." Instead, he shook himself free of philosophy and hung out with the many writers on campus at the time. In 1963, under the pressure of a need to make a living, he joined a computer development lab in Poughkeepsie.

Lindbloom's photographs are carried in Manhattan by Gallery 292, which also represents Eve Arnold, David "Chim" Seymour, Lois Greenfield, George Krause, and Dorothy Norman. His panoramics are there and also pictures taken with other cameras, such as the Diana—a plastic camera with a cyclops lens that was once mass-marketed for children, selling for about \$2.00. It produces what Lindbloom has described as "centerweight images due to a fall-off in focus and light toward their edges." Between 1979 and 1987, Lindbloom took the Diana on a number of trips to Florence, Italy, photographing figurative sculpture and landmarks. A selection of these extraordinary black-and-white pictures is contained in his volume *Angels at the Arno*. They look at first as if they had been produced by a Photo-Secessionist: the scenes are composed with great elegance, the textures of light and shadow are luscious, and from the statuary Lindbloom has coaxed a quality of alertness that makes it seem alive. That is, he has considered the poses not as essays in volume form, but rather as arrested movements in an ongoing animation. The effect ranges from the uncanny (a girl with tousled hair, backing into a doorway, who happens to have a pair of wings sprouting from her back and to be made of stone, at San Miniato) to the freaky (two stone horses, in vehement discussion under day-for-night lighting, at the Piazza della Signoria).

He began to experiment with the panoramic camera as he was winding up his work with the Diana.

"I had just left the computer world as a means of employment," he said. "I'd long loved Josef Sudek's pictures of Prague, and a set of panoramics by Jacques Henri Lartigue that he did in the early '20s. Having worked with the Diana for years and not indulged in equipment, I decided to indulge. Since moving from Detroit in 1963, I'd wanted to do something about the Hudson Valley, taking long drives from Poughkeepsie to Kingston and Fishkill. In 1981, I intended to take view-camera pictures of the valley; I got a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts to take time off for photography, but at the last minute I changed my mind and went to Italy with the Diana."

This long-delayed project with the panoramic is an expensive venture. The negatives, made from 2³/₄-roll film, are printed comparatively large, about eighteen-by-seven inches. A tripod is required.

In the beginning, Lindbloom also used a light meter, although now he judges light intuitively. And the printing is laborious. "I shoot a lot of negatives and

make a lot of work prints," he said. "As in the Florence project, I keep about one in forty I develop. I live with them, and then I decide what will be for exhibition and for book projects. In photography it's a lot of fishing, or, you might say, drawing. You invite accident and serendipity and chance and luck, and you marshal whatever skills you've acquired doing it. We all make photographs; one tries to make a body of work that formally coheres. For me, there was a long apprenticeship, but you turn a corner and start working in sets or series." (Last year, he initiated a new series—close-up views of marsh grass in Cape Cod—with a new camera, a 2¼ Hasselblad. Until one gets practically face-to-face with them they look not like photographs but rather like abstract etchings or ink drawings.)

He's rifling through his prints in the gallery presentation box, selecting examples of the panoramic series. "I was always a person who made *little* pictures," he says. "Now, these are too large for the bins."