

An Interview

A. M. Homes and Clifford Ross

A. M. HOMES: When I think of you and your work, one of the first things that comes to mind is your enormous enthusiasm, unbridled joy, determination, and something I'd call "emotional delight." In the past you've mentioned the concept of the Sublime as being critical to your work. Can you talk about that?

CLIFFORD ROSS: Well, I'm uncomfortable trying to put together the state of my emotions and the Sublime in one neat package, but I do know that from very early on, when I looked at art, I liked having my socks knocked off. I liked being overwhelmed and finding myself slightly giddy. Both abstract and realistic paintings were able to deliver the sensation—Rothko's and Rembrandt's could both do it. It was the effect and the content of the art that ultimately counted, not its form. Robert Rosenblum wrote about this issue in his essay "The Abstract Sublime," which introduced me to both Immanuel Kant's theory of the Sublime and to Gordale Scar (1812–14) by James Ward, one of my favorite paintings. Kant's take on the Sublime is terrific. He describes it as an overwhelming experience beyond comprehension, a point where the imagination reaches its limits and succumbs to "emotional delight."

Ward usually made little genre paintings of pigs and horses and goats, which you wouldn't think would qualify him for entry into the category of painters of the Sublime. Most of his paintings are mundane, not very interesting at all. But for some unknowable reason, at one point in his life, he uncorked this huge 11-by-14 foot painting of Gordale Scar, England's version of the Grand Canyon. The painting is a view of this enormous cliff, and there are tiny little cows at the bottom of it. I remember coming up to the picture for the first time and going, "Wow!" I immediately thought of Clyfford Still, the Abstract Expressionist. I understood Robert's point, that Ward's and Still's paintings weren't about abstraction or realism, they were about the Sublime. Different vocabularies led to similar content. And it was the content that was the turn on. There it was. I realized that their art wasn't about abstraction or realism, it was about the Sublime. That was the turn on.

A.M.H.: Within "Wave Music," you are able to embrace a tremendous amount of complexity. It seemed to me there are a multitude of contradictions as you move from the "Hurricane" series to "Horizons," and then further into the "Grain" series. We see exaltation matched with absolute stillness.

C.R.: The world is filled with inconsistencies and contradictions, and I find these contradictions inexplicably life affirming. I think the truth lies in the tensions between things. "Wave Music" consists of disparate types of images, but they all fit together in a way that hopefully gets at the larger truth—about the world, and about photography. It's an experience that embraces William Blake's philosophy in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. "Wave Music" is the Hegelian dialectic in black and white.

A.M.H.: Is weather part of your obsession? What is your relationship to the sea?

C.R.: Why waves and hurricanes? They're bigger than me. Nature is bigger than me. And I like tangling with Nature when it's dangerous and surprising. It's a thrill. As a kid, I spent a lot of time in and around the ocean. Somebody asked me years ago, when I first started "Wave Music," "How come waves?" I heard myself say, "Oh, I'm getting back at them." I didn't really understand what I meant at the time. Ultimately, I realized that I was reflecting on memories from my childhood, being slammed by the waves off Long Island when I was body surfing. To some extent, there's a notion that when you take a picture, you have codified and controlled an event. So photographing the sea during a storm echoes certain childhood experiences from a safer perspective, from a position of relative control. I say "relative," because I am literally in those hurricanes with my camera and anything could happen. The lack of control is part of what makes the art happen, because making art always involves accident and surprise.

A.M.H.: How do you relate that to the risks you take as an artist? You started out as an artist making paintings and sculpture. Now you're standing in the water during hurricanes holding a camera. How did that transition occur?

C.R.: It was a complete accident. For me, the work I do as a photographer parallels the work I did as a painter and sculptor, continuing to explore the dynamic range that runs between Romantic and Classical sensibilities.

In the early '90s, I was painting small oil studies directly from nature for my large, almost abstract, paintings. At the same time, I was taking photographic "notes." I had these little black-and-white contact prints floating around my studio and they caught the eye of my dealer. I brushed them off as mere reminders. But, he got me thinking about them. Ultimately, we included three tiny photographs in an exhibition of large-scale paintings. They were very physical paintings, and those little photographs were able to stand up to the paintings. It was a real shock. It was depressing, because it seemed as if my snapshots had as much weight as my "real" work—the paintings. I finally gave in to the fact that those little photographic "notes" had something going for them, and I got pulled into photography. I've never looked back because what I'm doing now is such a logical extension of what I did before.

A.M.H.: One of things that interests me in your work is the physicality of your involvement with things and how you work. Each of these media—sculpture, painting, photography—has very different expressive qualities, very different physical qualities, and very different working styles. Do you think each medium enables something different to be articulated within your overall artistic vision?

C.R.: Whatever the medium may be, I approach my work the same way. First of all, I've always needed to be up to my elbows in the materials of art, whether I'm using paint, canvas, clay, bronze, film, developer, or photographic paper. Making art for me has always been a very physical process. Second of all, I see each piece as an art object, with an accent on the word "object." Photographs, like painting and sculpture, exist for me first and foremost as objects, not as images. I've spent a lot of time dealing with the physical presentation of my photographs so they behave like painting and sculpture. I've designed

frame systems to underscore the physical nature of the photographic paper, so its “objectness” is made evident. I brought my attitudes about painting and sculpture into the world of photography and just don’t subscribe to the existing parameters of the medium. Take the concept of the “ideal” viewing distance. What’s that? If it doesn’t apply to painting, why should it apply to photography? I tend to look at prints as objects first, then as images. Standing in front of a large photograph by Andreas Gursky is a visceral experience involving color and scale. His photograph Rhine II reminds me of Barnett Newman. But the same issue of physicality can be present in Paul Strand’s small-scale work, also.

A.M.H.: It does seem to me that the process and conceptual challenges of photography are as interesting to you as the final product.

C.R.: I think that if you don’t like the process of making art, you’re not going to make good art. I’m truly enraptured by the process of photography. And I came to the medium in the mid-’90s with my knowledge bank as close to empty as it could be without being a complete idiot. I brought a sort of disruptive and almost anarchical attitude to the medium: “Gee, I don’t know the rules, I don’t want to know the rules, and I’d like to get photography to behave differently.” “Wave Music” was a path of exploration, not a preconceived idea.

A.M.H.: Do you think this lack of knowledge allowed you to push the limits and language of contemporary photography?

C.R.: Well, obviously I accumulated knowledge as time went by. I looked around to see what was going on. It’s not like I stayed unaware of what the medium could offer. Right off, I was interested in Doug and Mike Starn’s work. They produced photo-based work, but they threw out the rules of photography with such powerful abandon. Their production methods transcended traditional photography. Their attitude was not that they were simply going to point their camera at something different. They assembled their work with tape, glue, and everything else at hand. They built their photographs. I found their work very liberating.

Richard Misrach’s work, while more traditional, was really important to me early on as well. I think of him like the Raymond Chandler of photography. And I’m a big fan of Chandler’s work. Chandler refashioned the existing vocabulary of detective fiction into something rich and vibrantly different than what had come before—but without leaving tradition completely behind. I think Richard’s achievement is remarkable. And given my own aesthetic tendencies, his range of imagery is mighty interesting. He traverses the line from realism to abstraction like a great high-wire act.

Vera Lutter is another photographer whose work has been important to me. She took a deep dive into the medium and came up with something that is radical by using very old methods in a very new way. Even though it is not realistic in any traditional sense of the word, I actually get a profound sense of reality from looking at her work.

A.M.H.: I find her work so realistic that it’s painful.

C.R.: Right. The realism is partly due to the fact that, by using a pinhole camera at a huge scale, she attains perfect clarity. You can literally forget you are looking at a negative image, the sharpness of her prints is so staggering. It may be a strange association, but I think she is able to achieve the weird alchemy that Dalí achieved in a painting like *The Persistence of Memory*. Somehow we believe in those melting watches. I think people want to believe in an image when they look at art, especially in photography. And if an artist is adept enough with their medium to pull their audience into a made-up world and make them believe in it, then they've crossed a certain threshold. And that threshold is a defining characteristic of great art. Whether it's Rembrandt's scrumptious paint making you believe that you're seeing a figure, or Lutter's inverted, negative images making you think you're seeing reality, something magic is happening. You get a sense of reality that is heightened beyond normal experience. That's what art can do. In fact, that's what defines art.

I admire Gregory Crewdson for the same reason. He creates a believable but utterly surreal world. He's done it with a technical adeptness that is astonishing. What fascinates me about these artists is that they are all dealing with the same medium, yet they are working with so many different vocabularies. One of the thrills of being alive right now and making photographs is the fact that people are pulling the medium in so many different directions.

A.M.H.: I would love to hear you talk a bit about what music does for you, what literature does for you, and how they affect your process and your work.

C.R.: Music and literature serve to rough me up, to shake loose any preconceived notions I have about the medium I'm working in. My favorite book is *Moby Dick*. It is rough, flawed, and almost fails. But Melville's wild ambition and his uncanny ability to move from the particular to the fantastic enabled him to succeed. Through his clever use of realism, we are brought into contact with a dream world. It's an amazing feat.

A.M.H.: Would you consider yourself a modern artist dealing with old-fashioned values?

C.R.: Sure, that seems fair.

A.M.H.: And what impact does technology have on that?

C.R.: I think that artists are always changing the "technology," the machinery and methodology of art making, so they can better communicate their own message. If new methods or technologies become available, artists will make use of them. Nam June Paik loved television sets—look where that led.

A.M.H.: David Smith wrote that no artist can create outside of their time. He was talking about the welding techniques invented in World War II that enabled artists to create sculptures in new ways. Right now is an incredibly interesting period—essentially, we have one foot in the past and one foot in the future, simultaneously. Some days we are able to withstand and cope with that dichotomy, and other days we fall completely one way or the other. There's so much possibility as technology evolves, and there's also an interest in embracing and preserving more traditional ways of working.

C.R.: Artists will shake the cage, pushing the limits of their medium until it bends or breaks to fit their own needs. Right now a lot of artists are experimenting with photography. What shape will it take next? Sometimes people think artists are just trying to be avant-garde for the sake of being avant-garde. But the tradition of pushing against limitations goes back to the cave drawings in Lascaux. Charcoal and colored dirt were their media, their “technology” if you will. The Lascaux artists were thinking: what else can I do with a piece of charcoal? What else can I do with red clay? So, in the same way, I’m saying, what else can I do with a camera?

A.M.H.: Do you feel that it’s an artist’s job to create their own vocabulary? What about the need to be able to communicate in a way that can be understood?

C.R.: Well, I think good artists see the world in a new way. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be adding to our store of knowledge. And in order to express their perception, good artists have to expand on existing vocabularies. Good art means new vision, which necessitates new language. But it can’t be so radical that it can’t be understood at all, by anybody, or the artist would have no capacity to communicate. But let’s face it, the best art is always extremely challenging to understand when it first appears. The vocabulary, the form art takes, is tied to its content. If making art was just about the neutral presentation of a subject, and not about new perspectives and insights into the subject, the issue wouldn’t exist. One artist would have painted one apple, just once, and that would have been it for apple paintings. No need for Cézanne. Poof! It would have been done before. Developing a vocabulary unique to your own needs as an artist is critical. And if the content is important enough, people will learn the vocabulary.

A.M.H.: Your newest project involved building a super-high-resolution camera, the R1, and making the highest-resolution landscape photographs in the world; is that your means of shaking things up, of expanding the vocabulary available to you?

C.R.: With the R1, I pushed technically past what existed before. I became obsessed with the idea of getting beyond the normal limitations of photographic grain and resolution, and creating a “you are there” experience for the viewer. I had to invent something new to get what I wanted. I was struggling with this completely minimalist, openly reductive format in the “Grain” series when my brother-in-law introduced me to an amazing mountain vista while on vacation in Colorado. I took a couple of snapshots of the mountain, Mt. Sopris, and to my astonishment, found them interesting. Everyone around me in the studio thought I’d lost my marbles. I kept saying, “Look at the majesty; look at the color.” Then I realized that I was looking at the photographs the same way every tourist looks at their snapshots—lovingly and blindly, with my own private memory filling in the details. But I hadn’t delivered a damn thing to the people around me! They couldn’t see my memory. So I went back with a 4-by-5 camera after studying up a bit on color photography. But the second, more serious effort was still a failure. I wanted to capture that mountain, and my experience of it. I wanted to capture it with the power that Cézanne captured in his paintings of Mont Saint-Victoire. To express the sense of awe I experienced in front of Mt. Sopris with photography meant grabbing as much of the mountain as I possibly could in

one shot. So my job was simple: How do I capture as much reality as possible in one exposure?

A.M.H.: This seems to typify your process as an artist—“grabbing as much of the mountain as possible.” And with your invention of the R1, you are asking photography to capture much more than the human eye can capture in any given moment. The eye can’t take in all that detail in a fraction of a second. The R1 gives us more than we can see.

C.R.: That’s almost it. The camera captures way more than you can see at any given moment, but not necessarily more than we can see over time. R1 prints contain an overabundance of visual information. They allow you to look at photographs of Mt. Sopris for a long period of time, and at any distance, without running into grain or fuzzy details. Just like reality. Photography has always been a lie to some extent, in that it delivers an interpretation of reality—whether it’s a slice of it or an accumulation of it. My new work with this camera mimics the act of vision over time. The R1 prints give the viewer more power, because the viewers have the choice to look wherever they want, just as they would if they were in front of the scene.

Everyone talks about the surreal nature of Gregory Crewdson’s work, but what they’re really talking about is its theatrical nature. But what’s interesting to me is the realism of the work. I am not just entranced by the theatricality of the scene. I am entranced at my ability to find details in his work, and to be absorbed into his theater by “reading” the image. His photos unfold over time and tell a story through the accumulation of detail, just like your novels. I believe that the so-called static visual arts, if they’re working properly, invoke perceptions that usually take place over time.

A.M.H.: And with your new work, in a single image, you’re also giving us an ongoing play of sorts, an experience that takes place over time.

C.R.: Yes, it’s ironic—I’m giving you hours of experience in 1/15th of a second. I’ve become a visual playwright who doesn’t tell a story. And going back to dialectics, had I not dived so deeply into the essence of black-and-white photography, I wouldn’t be doing this work now.

A.M.H.: It’s funny, because on the one hand, you don’t know where you’re going, yet you keep going, and somehow it all links up. Going back to the “Hurricane” images. How do you describe what inspired and drove that series?

C.R.: One night, after I got involved with photography, I was watching TV and heard that there was a hurricane heading up the East Coast to Long Island. I thought, “Hurricane. Big waves. Get going.” It was just instinct. I threw my camera in the car and drove out to a beach in East Hampton that I knew from my childhood. I was just acting like a homing pigeon. And I got there in time to photograph the sea during the storm. The images I shot of that first hurricane were lousy. But I knew I was on to something. The next time a hurricane came up the coast, I was out there again. And then I shot another and another. It took two or three years to figure out where to position myself in the surf, how to develop

the film, and what scale the final prints should be. The first hurricane I shot was in 1995. But it wasn't until 1998 that I felt I had captured the first decent hurricane photographs.

But for me, the essence of black-and-white photography lies more in the printing than it does in the shooting. Printing represents 95 percent of the work in making my photographs. Printing is exhilarating. I relive the experience of being in a hurricane while printing the images in the darkroom. I always feel like I'm back in the surf.

A.M.H.: Did the "Grain" series progress naturally from the "Hurricane" pictures?

C.R.: Yes, but with a critical transition in the form of the "Horizon" images. I'm always working my way back and forth between the Romantic and Classical ends of the aesthetic spectrum. It isn't conscious. It's that dialectical need. I need to refresh my eye and recharge. And the "Hurricane" images are certainly at the Romantic end of the spectrum. The far end.

During the summer of 2000 I started to test a 4-by-5 camera with a mind to increase the resolution of my images, having used only a medium-format camera up to that point in time. So I found myself taking photographs of very gentle summer surf, just experimenting with the new format. And I found it was liberating for me to be free of the tumult and drama of the hurricanes. Those test images contained a modesty that I really liked. I was mesmerized by their simple rhythms, the geometry of the surf and the beach. The images were restrained and calm. I had accidentally found the next series, the "Horizons."

And then as I was printing the "Horizon" images, I fell in love with the flat gray tones that represented the sky. I experienced a conceptual moment, which is rare for me, but when it happens it's usually important. The gray tones were really nothing. Nothing but film and light. I somehow felt challenged to make art out of that. I wanted to create the most abstract, purest photographs possible. I wanted to see if the result could have enough weight to be art in aesthetic terms, and not just conceptually. That led to the "Grain" series, which is named for the silver grain in the film emulsion.

A.M.H.: What did you photograph to get the "Grain" series?

C.R.: Well, I woke up at 5 o'clock in the morning in a state of agitation, thinking, "My God, let's get pure now!" I grabbed every camera I had, and every type of film, took the lens off the front of my 8-by-10 horizontal enlarger, turned on its 2000-watt light bulb, and for three hours I just photographed straight into the light. And then, over weeks, I developed the film in a variety of ways, because I was intensely curious about the film itself. "What is this stuff?" I was in pursuit of photography's end point—or beginning point, take your pick.

Even though the process was intellectually interesting, aesthetically it gave me nothing. Ultimately, after months of struggling to deal with the material, it was dumped on the floor in the corner. And one day, on impulse, I just pinned up a few of the prints on the wall vertically instead of horizontally, which was their original orientation. The rectangles, roughly the size of the large "Hurricanes," were pale grays, blacks, and mid-tones. It didn't take a lot to realize that I had landed back where I had started as an artist in the early '70s,

with Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Ad Reinhardt. And frankly, I just couldn't believe those gray rectangles were affecting me the way they did. So, over time, I had various artist pals come by and gauge their own reactions, which were generally favorable. But the pictures of grain made me nervous. They were so close to nothing.

And then Lou Reed came over to look, and we began talking about his album from the '70s, *Metal Machine Music*, an album that almost ended his career. It's a very difficult piece of music, but strangely beautiful and moving. He talked about it as a celebration of the essential elements of rock and roll, "rhythm, noise, power, and emotion." The album subsequently became a seminal, iconic work. It is a gutsy, pure statement. And I think listening to that difficult music, and our conversation, sort of clinched it for me. I guess sometimes, if your work scares the hell out of you, you know you're on the right track.