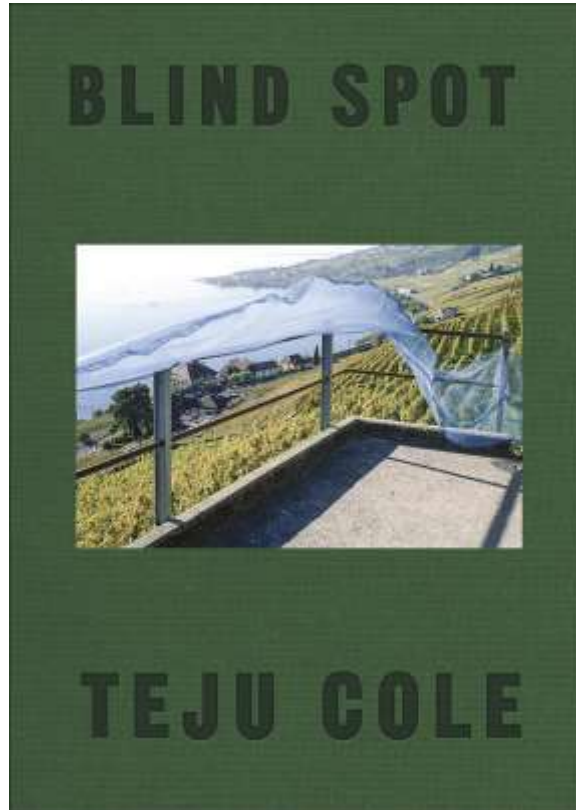


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## BLIND SPOT BY TEJU COLE

By Jonathan Russell Clark, June 25, 2017



“To photograph is to confer importance,” wrote Susan Sontag in her seminal 1977 work “On Photography.” “There is probably no subject that cannot be beautified; moreover, there is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects.” Photography, then, can find deep meaning not only in what is commonly considered ugly or horrifying, but also what is not commonly considered in the first place. A great photograph renders the invisible blindingly present.

Teju Cole’s newest work, “Blind Spot,” a collection of the author’s photos with accompanying textual commentary, is an eclectically brilliant distillation of what photography can do, and why it remains an important art form. Known for his novels “Open City” and “Every Day Is for the Thief,” Cole also is the photography critic for New York Times Magazine, and a hell of a nonfiction writer to boot (his recent essay collection “Known and Strange Things” unambiguously demonstrates this). “Blind Spot” proves that Cole’s singular talents extend into picture-making, yes, but more than that, it shows what an extraordinarily gifted writer he is.

This may seem like a counterintuitive suggestion — this being a book of photos, after all — but Cole’s often brief commentaries function less like little helping-hand guides and more like an expertly executed and insightful narrative. These bite-size prose pieces are intricately structured, hauntingly written and add up to much more than the sum of their parts. Cole comments on his own work, of course, but he also examines photography as a whole; he tells stories from his journeys, as one would assume, but he also tells the stories of his subjects, of friends and family, of figures throughout

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history (from classic mythology to our tentative present); and he writes about what the images show, but he also focuses on what they do not.

“Blind Spot” nestles into one’s head and heart subtly, slowly, with a true master’s sense of patience and earned trust. At first, some of his assertions trip the reader up, as in the first sentence of the first piece: “Spring, even in America, is Japanese.” But as the pages turn (and one should read “Blind Spot” chronologically, as this is the best way to appreciate Cole’s structural feat) Cole develops multiple parallel themes, teasing out a narrative that, although abstract, works on many levels. He mentions a time an interviewer asked why he doesn’t feature many people in his photos, so in the next series emerge human subjects, peripheral at first, and then more central, and it is only then that one notices that there hadn’t been any before that question was posed.

As for the photos themselves, Cole favors juxtapositions between fore- and background, usually featuring an unexpected intrusion on the viewer’s eye. A painting of a landscape on the wall of an inner city hotel; a stream of cloth dangling off a railing; scrunched pillows in the shape of sharp mountain ranges — Cole refers to these as “echoes and agreements,” and he also invokes the mythological hybrid creature the chimera throughout the book. Cole’s work, too, is filled with hybrid meanings, harmonious contrasts, unresolved yet congruent contradictions.

Finally, though, “Blind Spot’s” success leans not on the photos or the prose alone, but on the interplay between the two. Some of the images may have remained obscure without the supplementary paragraphs; so, too, would much of the writing lose its effect without the adjacent photos. This is not a criticism of the book but the highest praise: Cole has crafted a beautifully wrought and finely blended mixture of visual and narrative art. It is a chimera of thought and craft, of intellect and emotion, of the political and the personal, the historical and the contemporary.

In “On Photography,” Sontag quotes Walt Whitman to exemplify photography’s complex beauty dynamics: “each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty.” It is not simply that a photo grants value to whatever subject on which it focuses; it is that photographic meaning arises out of an endless array of interrelationships inside the image itself. Cole’s wonderful work perfectly encapsulates this notion, stuffed full as it is with the suggestion of the world’s deeply complicated synthesis. What’s even more striking is how communicating the intricacies of life does not take away from Cole’s artistic unity. In “Blind Spot,” Cole’s observant style is unmistakably his own, no matter how richly layered and eclectic his subjects are. This aesthetic harmony, despite the starkly varying images, is not unlike the way Cole describes cities (an environment he knows very well): “You zoom in and in, and still remain recognizably in a city.”