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DOUBLE VISION: TEJU COLE'S "BLIND SPOT"

By Michael Abatemarco, May 18, 2018



Everyone has a physical blind spot, the point where the optic nerve enters the retina. Because that point has no light-detecting photoreceptor cells, we experience a disruption in our visual fields there. Most of the time, we don't notice it, because the brain, in its seemingly indefatigable capacity for making things up, fills in the details, in part with information gleaned from the other eye. But there are other kinds of blind spots that have more to do with denial, along with our seemingly unceasing capacity for ignoring what's right in front of us or right under our noses.

In author and photographer Teju Cole's new book *Blind Spot* (Random House, 2017), however, New York-based novelist Siri Hustvedt suggests a viewpoint in her foreword that more closely resembles the creative alchemy that is involved in how the brain fills in those details that we cannot see: "There is considerable evidence ... that perception is not purely passive — that we not only take in the world, we also make it, and that learning is part of that creativity." What we

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perceive as real is a construction that is fashioned in the liminal space between empirical outer existence, and our intuitive inner sense — a metaphorical blind spot.

Blind Spot is a travelogue of sorts, filled with words and photographs, images whose titles derive from Cole's destinations. Only it is less about place than it is about perceptions. Accompanying the series of images shot in various locations are brief prose passages that sometimes relate to the images they accompany and sometimes do not, at least not in linear ways. Some texts might be directly inspired by the imagery in the corresponding photographs, and others are associated more in that oblique realm of the blind spot. Perhaps an image triggered an unrelated memory, or maybe it evoked a feeling that needed to be expressed. In its simple layout and structure, Blind Spot suggests as much about ways of understanding as it does ways of seeing.

It so happens that a series of photographs that accompany the book are part of the Lannan Foundation's collection, which go on view in an exhibition of the same name on Saturday, May 19. Sasha Weiss, culture editor of The New York Times Magazine, and Cole, the magazine's photography critic, give a free talk and slide lecture at SITE Santa Fe at 4 p.m. on Sunday, May 20. Cole selected the 32 photographs for the exhibition himself from the more than 150 images featured in Blind Spot.

Although one need not look to Cole's writings for context for the photographs, they inspire ways of looking at the images that are as limitless, in a narrative sense, as any allegorical painting. One might not readily associate an image of a canvas tarp fastened to a railing with Christian symbolism, but the text accompanying such an image, taken in Zürich, makes such tantalizing suggestions: "A length, a loop, a line," it reads. "Faraway wave seen from the deck of the ship. I think the Annunciation must have happened on a day like this one. Stillness. In the interior, she reads with lowered eyes, unaware of what comes next. A presence made of Absence, the crossbar, the cloth, the wound in his side."

Then, accompanying a New York City photograph, Cole talks of his actions as a photographer. Here, his words connect more readily and explicitly to the accompanying shot of a blond-haired woman from behind, crossing an intersection. "I follow her for one city block," he writes. "Thirty seconds after the the first photograph, I take a second. Against my will, and oblivious to hers."

An interesting component of these pairings is that word and image are given equal weight. The prose is evocative, rich in imagery, and can stand on its own. The photographs are open to interpretation. They invite story but also need no explanation. The pairings have a relationship to each other, but are not interdependent parts of a whole. But the types of images presented in Blind Spot, which tend more toward candid rather than posed or staged photography, purport to reflect an objective reality where meaning is only inherent in the observations of the viewer, not in the photo itself — whereas the prose presented is, by necessity, more subjective.

The final image, of a boy by the Congo in Brazzaville gripping a railing, and the accompanying text express this dual nature in a way that seems to sum up the book. In the accompanying narrative, he tells of carved Mangaaka figures, protective sentries that were sculpted bigger over time in an effort to ward off impending societal collapse after hundreds of years of strife under European colonists. Scholars, he writes, described the Mangaaka as "intensely reflective." Of his photographic subject, Cole states, "This boy is double-visioned. He is looking out, looking outward, but here, poised at the edge of the crisis, he is also looking inward, looking in." Maybe he sees something of himself in this boy or maybe not. But for all its interplay of objective and subjective realities, one needs no better description of Blind Spot.