Artist Review – Steve McCurry

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Steve McCurry’s body of work primarily consists of portraits, in a style of artistic photojournalism. His portraits depict subjects that are dirty, grimy, in unpleasant or darkly satirical situations, or generally people that would normally not be hiring a professional photographer to take their picture. His subjects are people in what is inferred to be third-world countries, in rural areas or poverty. McCurry works in color, mainly on film. I believe that his work is socially, as well as personally motivated. His artistic edge to all of his pictures, wonderful composition, and gorgeous colors speak for the personal artistic expression that he wishes to convey, however, the photo-journalistic undertone of exposition of the lives and images of the people in his subjects can definitely also transmit a social message.

McCurry’s work is not as diverse as that of other photographers, as he shoots almost all portraits. However, the variety comes from the people, backgrounds, colors, composition, and techniques and artistic values used in each picture.

Some key characteristics that make McCurry’s work unique include his quality of color, the style of subject matter, and the grunge and gravelly aspect of his photographs. His colors are always vibrant, deep, and gorgeous, and bring out his subjects and backgrounds much more vividly than they are in real life. This creates a sort of surreal and heavy feeling to his pictures, as opposed to the light and crisp, pretty colors found in many other photographs. The subjects in his photos are always somewhat unclean, and seem to come from a filthy and low lifestyle and environment. Also, this dirty look is augmented by the grunge and hard grain in some of his pictures, which brings them to a shocking blast of reality rather than an elegant work of art.

I chose Steve McCurry because I adore his ability to reveal the raw, organic beauty behind the façade of somebody dirty and unkempt. His street photography and captures of the harsh reality of life, when combined with the deep colors, heavy vignettes, and heavy aspect of his photos, creates something truly beautiful. There is both a direct and an implied mood in his work. The direct mood, in my opinion, consists of the dirty and unsettling feeling of grime and heaviness, while there is also an indirect, implied mood of beauty in the form of agony and life in its purest and most untarnished form. I feel a very different response to each of his images. For example, in his ever-so-popular Kodachrome portrait of the woman wearing a red cloak on a green background conveys the intensity and heaviness of the subject’s piercing stare, contrasting the beauty and vividness of the colors in the background. However, his photo of the little boy with a dirt-stained shirt standing against a wall, holding a gun bigger than his arm up to his head, obviously conveys an extremely different mood: not one of reverent and piercing beauty, but one of horror and anguish.

Through these contrasts between beauty and horror, between vivid colors and the muted and dull aspect of the lives portrayed, and between innocence and misfortune, Steve McCurry delivers a heavy artistic message, conveyed by a harsh onslaught of reality.