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Emmet Gowin: Loving the Problem

By JONATHAN BLAUSTEIN



Emmet Gowin, Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Edith. Danville, Va. 1963.

The telephone rang in a Pennsylvania home last month and was answered by Edith Gowin, known to many as the subject of her husband's most striking photographs.

"Emmet is deep down in the basement, but I'll run and get him for you," she said. On the other end of the line, the caller paused, genuinely unsure if she was speaking plainly or in metaphor, as Emmet Gowin is famous for the lyricism and poetry of his imagery and writing.

Mr. Gowin picked up the handset several minutes later and confirmed that he had been deep in the bowels of his home, where his digital printing studio is. He was busy working on a project about insects in South America, but he took time out to share advice and perspective about life and art, and to discuss his recently published monograph, "Emmet Gowin," which explores his career and was produced in conjunction with a major 2013 retrospective in Madrid and Bilbao, Spain.

The book, published by Aperture and the Fundación Mapfre in Spain, provides a thorough examination of his creative practice as it evolved over nearly five decades. Along with two curatorial essays, the volume contains a hand-written copy of Mr. Gowin's graduate thesis and his retirement lecture to students at Princeton University, where he taught for many years. The images range from memorable documents of his wife's family in rural Virginia to aerial landscapes of Earth.

"I felt like the pictures were coming to me directly out of life itself," he said. "I wasn't just making these up. I was applying what I had learned, but I was using them in situations that no one could have thought of before they existed. The clues that I had gotten, I just applied them."

Mr. Gowin rose to prominence in the 1960s, having studied with the Modernist legend Harry Callahan at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he received his M.F.A. He had been raised in rural Virginia in a religious family, and while art had not been projected for his future, he always knew there was something out there, perhaps beyond the career in ministry his parents had hoped for.

In fact, the willingness to stay open to life's possibilities became the driving force behind his evolution as an artist. When asked whether chance and intuition were the foundations for his career, he replied, "Well, put simply, yes."

Over time, he said, he learned "to just be patient with yourself, and hold back judgment, and hold back big ideas, and just pay attention to what's happening around you. And you get little clues. Some of them seem so focused and relevant to you personally that I think you would feel bad if you didn't act on it. Pretty soon, you're doing something, and you say, almost by surprise, 'I guess this is where I was going, but I didn't know it at the time.'"

It was that keen trust in his instincts that led him in 1964 to marry Edith Morris (slide 1), who became his wife, muse, and creative partner — and remains so. Like his contemporaries Lee Friedlander and Nicholas Nixon and his mentor Mr. Callahan, Mr. Gowin made countless photographs of his wife, which allow the viewer to see her age over time.



Emmet Gowin, Courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Edith, Newtown, Pa. 1994.

Some of the early pictures of Edith are risqué, as she flashed her bare breasts at the camera, perched behind her elderly grandmother, or urinated standing up in an old tobacco shed. The nudity makes sense in the context of the '60s, but it seems not to explain the residual strength of the photographs. Rather, it is her penetrating gaze, which locked into Mr. Gowin behind the camera, that still engages the viewer.

In the course of conversation, it was suggested to Mr. Gowin that perhaps the intelligence shining in Edith's eyes — rather than her comely figure — gave power to the pictures. "No one has said exactly that to me before," he replied. "That's so dignified. I can only repaint to you that not only is that a correct read, but there is a force of will in her, coupled with intelligence. Powerful intuition that doesn't miss very often."

"It was just the sense that she could see through things," he said.

After Edith's grandmother died, Mr. Gowin pulled back from photographing family life in the South and began investigating the remains of ancient societies: ruined villages in Italy and the stone city of Petra in Jordan. Pivotaly, he then took one step farther back, photographing Earth's surface through airplane windows.

He began after the eruption of Mount St. Helen's in the early '80s, but expanded his range to include manmade destruction, such as mining, farming, toxic industrial runoff, hidden military missile silos and a nuclear bomb test site in Nevada.

"It was my intuition that the test site was something that should be seen, if it was at all possible," he said. "And that it should be a part of everyone's living experience as much as could be conveyed through pictures. It should be witnessed."

Parallel to his successful art career, Mr. Gowin taught for 36 years at Princeton. Though some suggest the dual efforts detract from one another, Mr. Gowin heartily disagrees. He believes the challenge forced him to grow, and that giving freely of oneself, without reservation, brings back rewards in the end.

“In the exercise of trying to say the old thing fresh again, every week or every year, you learn,” he said. “Pure and simple. You keep coming back to the problem, and you keep touching it and caressing it, and thinking about it, and in a way loving it. You love the problem.”

It’s not that different from the constant reinvention required of an artist. Mr. Gowin mentioned a suggestion he had received from his friend Frederick Sommer that as we age, we ought to read difficult books that push us out of our comfort zones, even if we don’t understand them. Growth requires active engagement, he has learned. The well-lived life comes down to a willingness to explore, to push further into the unknown, and a desire to seek answers to perhaps unanswerable questions.

“You’re always working at the margin of what you don’t understand,” Mr. Gowin concluded. “That’s the only exhilarating place to be. To just illustrate what you already know is condescending, and a waste of your time.”