

Travels in Burma, Ghana And the American City

DECEMBER 23, 2011

By [RICHARD B. WOODWARD](#)

Who knew that Felice Beato could do it all? Historians have typecast the Italian-British adventurer (1832-1909) as an intrepid war photographer. He certainly excelled at that precarious job, following the cannons' roar across Asia during the 19th century and inventing photojournalism along the way.



The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

'Sacred Temple of Heaven' by Felice Beato

But as audiences learned from Anne Lacoste's **"Felice Beato: A**

Photographer on the Eastern Road"

at the Getty Center, he was no less skillful handling landscapes, architecture, portraiture and social documentary. The Burmese monks in a group portrait from the 1890s are as twitchily alive now as when Beato pressed the cable release. Each boy is seen as an individual jostling for position in the robed lineup while also acting aware that they're posing together

for the camera. Only a photographer curious about people could have made it, an indication that Beato's professional life was animated as much by empathy as by wanderlust and profit.

Long before his death in 1999, Harry Callahan's unique ability to balance steely formalism and human tenderness had earned him the respect of curators, critics, other photographers and his many ex-students. His greatness as a major American artist was no secret to them, so why didn't the public treasure him in the same way? The National Gallery of Art's tribute, **"Harry Callahan at 100,"** which opened this year (on his 99th birthday) and runs through March 4, 2012, suggests that perhaps now it does. Attendance figures and press reaction to this cogent exhibition denote a level of acclaim he hadn't attained before. Whether making black-and-white portraits of his wife and daughter while eking out a living as a Midwestern art teacher, or working in color late in life as an honored master, he never stopped experimenting with the medium. Distilled into 100 ravishing prints by the National Gallery's senior curator of photography, Sarah Greenough, Mr. Callahan's standing looks more solid than ever.



Enlarge Image

(c) James Casebere/The Metropolitan Museum of Art

James Casebere's "Landscape with Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #1."

In the 1980s numerous exhibitions took stock of photography's new ambition and acceptance in the contemporary art market. For some reason, surveys of this sort have fallen out of favor. **"After the Gold Rush,"** at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through Jan. 2, proves the value of historical fly-overs. Associate curator Douglas Eklund has astutely selected works by 15 artists in the Met's collection that represent trends found in galleries and schools around the globe. Among the most promising trends he identifies is the oblique but effective treatment by artists of social themes usually confined to photojournalism. James Casebere's "Landscape With Houses (Dutchess County, NY) #1" (2009) is a construction: He built a housing development in miniature in a studio and then photographed it. But the very artifice of the morning haze from his electronic light source only underlines the illusion of a real-estate bubble that has landed us in the current economic mess.

Wolfgang Tillmans has for a long time been the moody folk rocker of personal documentary, the slackness of his ad hoc picture-taking and presentation bordering on the apathetic. He finally won me over with his 2000 project on the Concorde taking off and landing. Viewed as a faraway object that embodied our confused feelings about escape and technology, the series deservedly won the Turner Prize. **"Out of the Boxes,"** a miniature retrospective assembled by the Swiss curator Beatrix Ruf at the Andrea Rosen Gallery this spring, disclosed his familiar yearnings as well as the secret that he is more of a classicist than he thinks.



[Enlarge Image](#)

(c) Pieter Hugo/Yossi Milo Gallery, NY and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town

A photograph from Pieter Hugo's 'Permanent Error' series

Pieter Hugo's latest series from Africa, **"Permanent Error,"** depicts scavengers at a dump site for obsolete electronics in Ghana that bears the Swiftian name of Agblogbloshe. This Stygian place may be where your old printer or PC or iPhone ended up after you updated. The information age is too often regarded as more virtual than real. Mr. Hugo wants us to know in these large color portraits, shown this fall at the Yossi Milo Gallery, that it's still a material world, and for those who survive by melting down plastic computer casings to get at the copper wiring inside, it can be a "Mad Max"-like inferno.



[Enlarge Image](#)

(c) Judith Joy Ross/Pace/MacGill Gallery

'Children in Neshaminy Creek' by Judith Joy Ross

Judith Joy Ross's portraits around her Pennsylvania home can be baffling in their frank simplicity. In the latest exhibition at Pace/McGill, through Jan. 28, 2012, she observes neighbors caring for their farm animals and then demonstrating against hydrofracking for natural gas. In black-and-white or in color (this marks her debut in that format), she attends to the local human exchanges that she sees every day and that keep her hope for democratic community alive.