



Along the Lilac Lane, 1960

Return to Riverrun

Introduction to John Brook's Photographs

A Long the Riverrun A Portfolio by John Brook

Brook captured the era in photographs of friends and their families in a style that was independent of trends and distinctively his – soft-focused, with enhanced attention to light and shadow, an emotional connection to the subject, overt symbolism, and a profound consideration of human relationships – which all visually translated to a work of art. His attentiveness to the technical innovations of the photographic process is apparent across multiple series and subjects, in both personal works and commissions. A chance optical aberration in a portrait of a father and child led to his experimentation with lenses, which he would often construct himself. Commissioned portraits have a distinctive soft-focused flair to them, with settings reminiscent of an earlier time.

Brook seemed to relish the idea of being of another time. In an anecdote regarding an exhibition at the Carl Siembab Gallery, Brook recalled that Siembab described him as a photographer who took “100-year-old pictures every day.” He often described his work in otherworldly terms, as illustrations of thoughts and fantasies, and not necessarily grounded in reality. In a 1969 exhibition statement, Siembab described Brook’s photographs as images that “confront us with a world that the photographer has dreamt and thereby willed into existence.” Brook wrote of seeking beauty in his works in a way that placed his philosophy in the realm of the social and cultural mores of the late-nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement, whose artists asserted the authority of beauty as the force behind all aspects of daily life.

Brook’s works, in both subject matter and style, are also closely aligned with the Pictorialist movement of the turn of the twentieth century. Pictorialists sought to establish photography as a fine art through carefully chosen and idealized subject matter, soft focus, and low tonal gradation. A pictorial landscape was a romantic pastoral escape, and figures symbolized ideals of beauty. Brook’s veneration of the human form closely aligns him with pictorial photography, and he is perhaps most known for his soft-focused representations of the nude. Works appearing in *A Long the Riverrun* include male and female figures, both alone and together, posed in sun-dappled natural settings. Brook unabashedly sought the beautiful in his work, describing a process where he “found beautiful people, places, and moments in a world that was getting uglier every day.”

In interviews, Brook stated that his work did not have any photographic influences, but it is difficult not to read some photographic history into his subjects, settings, and aesthetics. Besides the formal elements of Pictorialism, there is edginess in his subject matter, particularly in his treatment of the nude, which is immediately reminiscent of F. Holland Day. Brook’s work can be challenging, and he asks us to look beyond the subject that he often provocatively captured with the camera. His use of the symbolic and allegorical tenets of Pictorialism speak to his philosophy that subjects appear as they are found, and represent more than can be seen with the naked eye. He confirmed this for the *Boston Review of Photography*: “I use whatever optical technique seems best suited to what I happen to be doing, but the character of the image is determined at the moment of exposure and not altered later in the darkroom.” His interest in capturing the unseen puts him among the science and mysticism that drove a number of artists working mid-century in Boston, as well as connecting him to a long photographic tradition espousing a desire to visualize the unseen.

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