

Crow

Peter Culley

Nothing is supposed to be included which is not visible.

Nikolaus Pevsner, "The Buildings of England"

Bewick knew that rural life could be cruel, that breaking stones on the road or finding sheep on the fells in winter is soul-destroying work, that desperate men could hang themselves from trees beside sweet-flowing burns. He was tough and so was his art. His greatness, as the artist John Piper said, lay in the fact "that he registered what he saw with precision... he had that rarest of qualities — normal unhampered, unclouded vision."

Jenny Uglow, "Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick"

The eye of a bird appears perfectly round, and is composed of a central area of black, encircled by a ring, sometimes hardly distinguishable from the inner division, or again it may be highly coloured. The circular centre or pupil is always of a uniform black, and no wonder, for "it is not a thing — it is the hole in a thing." As when we look through the lens of a camera, only the blackened inside of the bellows is reflected to us, so in the eye of a bird, the delicate living lens, itself invisible, reflects the black pigmented tissue at the back of the eyeball. The image passes through this lens and is thrown upon the curtain of jet, and here the brain nerves find it and know it — how, we cannot even guess.

C. William Beebe, "The Bird: Its form Form and Function"

I hope I might be forgiven in the present august context for admitting at the outset that I have little to add to what either others or I have written about the photography of Roy Arden. Furthermore none of these previous efforts — and Arden has never lacked for qualified, even inspired exegesis, not least his own — have significantly altered my *experience* of the work *as seen*, the nature of which I am as distant from being able to either express or comprehend as when I first encountered it more than two decades ago. Everything hinges on reiterated moments of optical apprehension so far outside of usable language that its after-the-fact application is inevitably reductive, literary, fantastic — manifestly less interesting and suggestive than the images themselves. And though *to be less interesting* may be an honourable function

of catalogue copy, it gets me no closer to a usable mapping of personal response, or to offer any instruction to the reader other than to stop reading (now!) and just go look again, and then again. What could I say, for instance, about an image like the 2002 *Crow* that would either qualify that response or adequately prepare someone else's?

The immediacy and power of its sensual impact precede not only "critical" understanding but for a long moment even the proper registration of detail. The light falls on the curb with such a crushing equality of weight that the depth of the curb's recession all but disappears; everything from the remnants of the title subject, the Coke Classic cup, the tiny but oddly variegated heaps of gravel, the metal letters and symbols, the pitch black slits of the sewer grate openings (echoed by a white pebble's shadow in the "foreground" — the "hole in the thing") are all epically flattened, crushed as if between the glass plates of a laboratory slide. But the stillness of *Crow* feels less photographic than entropic, its narrative details embedded within the image with the fixedness of the aggregate pebbles dotting the concrete, frozen less by the snap of a shutter than sheer material exhaustion. It is less an image of arrested decay than a record of an infinitely slow recombination. All that remains of the titular bird — whose resting place and reliquary the image ultimately is — are two spreads of feathers, perhaps attached to some skin but otherwise obscured in the folds of sacking material into which the wheels of dozens of cars, trucks, buses and street-sweepers have endlessly ground and transformed it. One feels the image — not in its apparent detachment but in the all-over precision of its focus — could have been recorded on the eye of another passing crow, another city-dweller unsentimentally recording a fallen comrade before hopping along to the next snack.

But again this is interpretation and improvisation, and Roy Arden's power resides precisely in his ability to consistently record moments of this bird-like, almost feral immediacy of apprehension, the seeing that happens *before* the foggy habits of interpretation start organising the details and screening out the noise. That Arden has been able to do this over such a long period suggests that this ability is innate, and that the triumph of his career has been to both usefully nurture this gift and, crucially, to stay out of its way. The video *Eureka* (2005) which reproduces the wandering gaze of a junkie looking through an alley for an unspent vial — and his edit of CBC-Vancouver Hockey riot riot footage, *Supernatural* (2005), act (reversing the gallery's usual dynamic of photography and video) as a kind of oblique supporting documentation for the still images, illustrating in both instances occasions where clear sight can mean survival or extinction. Whether another fix, a rock to throw, the warning a sudden emergence of the law swinging clubs — sight is base perception, necessary evolutionary inheritance, the projection of pure desire. Arden reminds us again and again that behind the discriminating eye of the *flâneur* and the tender gaze of the voluptuary is the weary hunter scanning the horizon for game, the sailor staring into the blue for the first appearance of land.