

# FAVORITE BOOKS OF 2005

Geoff Dyer, *L.A. Times*

Photography is an abundant medium. In the movies, at least, photographers never take a single picture; they always shoot a whole roll. Unlike painting, it's as easy to do 10 pictures as it is to do one. Take enough photos and at least a couple of them will turn out OK. (What's more, the potential reproducibility of those images is inherent in the definition of the medium.) In poetry or prose, a relatively small output poses no critical difficulties. You can be a great novelist on the evidence of a single book. But the great photographers tend to be marked by their plenitude.

This year, two utterly inexhaustible photographers were honored with exhibitions that had to be huge: Lee Friedlander at New York's Museum of Modern Art and Araki at the Barbican in London. Naturally, each exhibition was accompanied by a 20-ton book to lug home as a souvenir: "**Friedlander**" (Museum of Modern Art: 480 pp., \$75) and "**Araki: Self, Life, Death**" (Phaidon: 720 pp., \$75). Anything less — a slim volume, a skimpy selection — would have failed to do the photographer justice. Over the years, moreover, both men have demonstrated a special fondness for the photographic book as a way of showcasing their work. Both photographers have done a bit of everything (portraits, landscapes, abstractions, distortions, nudes) or, as we say in England, a bit of this, that and the other. Araki, famously, has an insatiable zest for the other. Had the show of his work been staged 20 years ago, the Barbican would have been picketed by feminists. Now, his images of women tied up, tied down and bent over for our intimate inspection produce not anger but a delighted sense of all-pervasive perversion. But his vision, lest we forget, is as wide-ranging, as freewheeling as Friedlander's: There is pathos and — also intrinsic to the medium — ordinariness.

The same could be said of André Kertész, the variegations of whose career in Hungary, France and the U.S. enhance its underlying consistency. There were already plenty of nice editions of his work out there, but "**André Kertész**" (Princeton University Press: 302 pp., \$60) is the best one-volume edition available — not simply because of the quantity of images or the high standards of reproduction but also because of the quality of its essays by Sarah Greenough, Robert Gurbo and Sarah Kennel.

Although Kertész was one of the pioneers of the on-the-hoof Leica style of photography, there is always something graceful and leisurely about his work. When Stephen Shore first left his native New York City to travel around the United States in 1972 and 1973, by contrast, he appeared to be photographing everything — toilets, store windows, people, half-finished meals — while scarcely even pausing to contemplate the results. This approach's hasty proximity to the snapshot was enhanced by the fact that Shore was working in color. Although tourists then used color without a second thought, most serious photographers were still wedded to black-and-white as an artistic ideal. (This was four years before William Eggleston had his all-important show of color photographs at MoMA.) Since then, Shore has moved to a large-format camera, partly to slow himself down, to curb the urge to photograph everything all the time. The long-

awaited complete record of his early '70s sprint, **"American Surfaces"** (Phaidon: 232 pp., \$55), has now taken on an almost accidental majesty: The unhindered excitement of the original undertaking is still obvious, but the very idea of the surface has, in the intervening years, acquired a profundity all its own.

Something like the opposite has, I fear, occurred with Robert Doisneau's **"Paris"** (Flammarion: 400 pp., \$60). People felt a tad cheated on learning that his famous shot of Parisian snoggers, "The Kiss," had been posed rather than snatched from the flow of French life. Even if you agree that there is nothing ethically or aesthetically dubious about this, some kind of collateral damage has, nevertheless, occurred: namely, that all of Doisneau's work now looks contrived — not just in the literal sense of prearranging what is meant to appear serendipitous. No, now even the accidental seems to have nothing serendipitous about it! The pictures are overlain by the emulsion of the effect Doisneau wanted to create — it's as if the pictures try to articulate a response as well as a scene.

David Goldblatt's work is unfathomable in the best way. I am always intrigued by pictures that I don't understand, and I don't really get what's going on in his large-format color photos of post-apartheid South Africa in **"Intersections"** (Prestel: 124 pp., \$60). The people in Goldblatt's portraits stare vacantly at and through the camera. Nothing unusual about that, of course, but then, looking at the shots of unpeopled space, one gets the impression that the landscape is doing the same thing — staring with the same fixed vacancy.

The stares of Mary Ellen Mark's subjects are altogether more familiar. We have also seen this look of special pleading — special because nothing is being requested — in the work of Diane Arbus. The difference is that Mark's intensely individualized work operates within a broader documentary context, one defined as much by a reporter's sense of obligation to her subjects as by an artist's insistent personal predilections. **"Exposure"** (Phaidon: 288 pp., \$79.95) collects her own sampling of "iconic" (a word I have sworn never to use, only to quote) work from the last 40 years.

If Mark's photographs have an ability to lay bare the nakedly obvious, Abelardo Morell's camera transforms the shadowy recesses of the world into something even more shadowy. The fact that what he finds in these shadows is quite ordinary — books, kids' toys, a paper bag — makes the results magically disorienting and (as in the cover image of a vase perched on the edge of a table) precarious. This year, a fantastic selection of his work was published, **"Abelardo Morell"** (Phaidon: 140 pp., \$49.95).

Since Morell is very consciously an artist whose medium is the camera, I was surprised not to find him in Susan Bright's **"Art Photography Now"** (Aperture: 224 pp., \$50), an excellent survey of the ways in which the photographic pantheon is being refurbished by photographers who see themselves as artists. The problem with this kind of book is that it needs updating from the moment it is published — to take account, for example, of An-My Le, whose fascinating restaging of Vietnam battle scenes in American landscapes can be studied, at leisure, in **"Small Wars"** (Aperture: 128 pp., \$40).

**"Moments"** (Black Dog & Leventhal: 302 pp., \$29.95) operates at the other end of the spectrum: a collection of Pulitzer Prize-winning photographs from 1942 to the present that are defined not by what the photographer intended or arranged but by the moment or incident depicted. Many are by acknowledged masters of photojournalism; others are by amateurs who got lucky, who happened to be on the scene while someone was experiencing incredibly bad luck — dying, for example. **"Anonymous: Enigmatic Images From Unknown Photographers"** (Thames and Hudson: 208 pp., \$29.95) goes a step further. Some of the pictures, besides being taken by unknown photographers, are of unknown subjects taken at an unknown place and time. They exist in a weird vacuum that only enhances their enigmatic power.

Photographer Alec Soth has pointed out that anyone can take a great photograph; the difficult thing — to go back to where we started — is to take a collection of great photographs. The photos in **"Shadows of War: A German Soldier's Lost Photographs of World War II"** (Abrams: 192 pp., \$35) complicate this view on several levels. The soldier in question was Willi Rose, who served in Poland and Russia. His stash of photographs was discovered by his widow, but there is no guarantee they were all taken by him (some could have been by fellow soldiers; it was not uncommon, apparently, for soldiers to trade pictures). They are extraordinarily intimate — naked soldiers crossing a river — and, despite our grasp of the appalling context in which they were made, often quite idyllic. Haunting and troubling, it is as if they had been processed and sent back to us from beyond the grave. Geoff Dyer is the author, most recently, of a book about photography, "The Ongoing Moment."