

Summer 1972

The Flowering Rhinoceros: An Extension of Photography into Other Media

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THE FLOWERING RHINOCEROS:
AN EXTENSION OF PHOTOGRAPHY INTO OTHER MEDIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Faculty
Central Washington State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Lawrence Leslie Bullis
August, 1972

APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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ILLUSTRATIONS

THE FLOWERING RHINOCEROS:
AN EXTENSION OF PHOTOGRAPHY INTO OTHER MEDIA

by

Lawrence L. Bullis

August, 1972

This paper develops, in a literary form, thematic material derived from fourteen photographically etched metal pieces, two photo-serigraphs, and six photographically produced intaglio prints. The narrative takes the form of an allegorical fantasy which contains a practical attitude toward photographic alchemy. New insights are provided into the origins and nature of the photographic medium in the light of the symbolic context of the artwork.

Illustrations of the artwork from which this paper derives are provided.

TO THE READER

It is my intention to present, in this paper, a companion to the work which constitutes my thesis show. I do this intentionally to avoid the two common alternatives of either a technical paper or a collection of my own opinions. The reader who is interested in the technical problems of photo-etching should refer to the bibliography; the works cited therein describe the process fully and accurately.

Of my own opinions, I shall express two, and then get into the work of the Rhinoceros himself. The first opinion is that my opinions are worth about as much as anyone else's and do not as such constitute valid subject matter for a paper related to artwork, which, by common agreement, must stand on its own. The second is, perhaps, less an opinion than a conviction that an artist, no matter how large or small he may work, is responsible for thought of the largest dimensions possible for himself. It is to this end that he employs symbols which become vehicles wherein the scale of his thought is described.

The Rhinoceros and his friends are projected upon the plane of our ordinary "consciousness", but the world they describe exists somewhere else. The Rhinoceros himself takes the role of an intermediary between these two worlds. To preserve the functional relationship between the symbol and its subject, the material that follows will take the form of a series of allegorical episodes.

Introduction to the Rhinoceros' Metaphysics

The Rhinoceros stands motionless pondering the rich and weighty question of ultimate good and evil. One by one, the rivets pop out of his skin under the shrill pressure of his mentation. The bones of his skull reverberate from the rush of air across the temples, and his arched-spring spinal column resonates in a variety of tones which finally terminate in a steady high A above middle C.

Summer comes and goes. The trees lose their leaves. The Rhinoceros is covered with snow, quietly vibrating; humming; drumming. Throbbing like a locomotive accelerating its freight uphill as the snow melts, he draws a great gulp of air in through his lily grey ears, churns, and with a small puff smoke ring from his left nostril, rears on his two remaining hind legs, winks at his horn and switches his tail viciously.

This is how a Rhinoceros conceives an idea.

The Postmaster General and the Rusty Lady Come to Stampede Pass

Nobody knows for sure whether they came up from Lester or over Snoqualmie Pass, but come they did, pausing time after time on their snowshoes to put letters in the tree-slung mailboxes or to turn over the piles of rusty things.

The Postmaster charged to the top of every hill, thrashing through the brush and bellowing not unlike the black Rhinoceros: "The mail must go through!"

It is said that the bears at Stampede Pass always walk backward so that people running away from them will run into them instead.

The Rusty Lady found a twelve foot tall heap of rusty things, and wouldn't leave it all day long.

"I'm hungry," said the Postmaster.

"Too bad," said the Rusty Lady. "It's too late in the season for the Huckleberry Breakfast."

No one knows (except, maybe, the Rhinoceros) whether the Postmaster ever found the Great Collection Box.

It is hard to find the Rhinoceros in the snow. Rhinoceroses seldom leave tracks in snow.

On the Unity of Being in the World: A Practical Distillation of the Rhinoceros' Pure Thought or How Kittitas is Like San Francisco

Dense clouds of pure steam poured forth from the Rhinoceros' ears and congealed in layers about his feet, reaching the level of his massive shoulders. The pool of steam became a liquid and, in time, began to undulate with a wave-like motion which gradually increased both in frequency and amplitude. After several months the churning liquid could no longer be contained by the barriers of the ordinary forces of the earth. The earth, overcome, gave way; the torrent broke and flowed across the valley - right down into Kittitas. The Rhinoceros, rising triumphant from the receding flood bellowed: "A wet bird never flies at night!"

The flood picked up every garbage can in Kittitas, swept through Badger pocket, and sank into the Yakima firing range. Somewhere on the firing range is a lot of garbage.

A similar event is said to have happened in San Francisco a few years before when the Great Rhinoceros of Twin Peaks erupted, creating San José.

In the Shadow of the Rhinoceros, the Origin of Photography is
Explained by Nicéphore Niépce

Nicéphore Niépce and the Postmaster sat in the huckleberry fields beneath the railroad tunnel at Stampede Pass lazily munching the Huckleberry Breakfast. As the shadow of the Great Rhinoceros moved across the hill to where they sat, the hills grew less and less distinct. At last it became dark. The Postmaster began to speak.

"This phenomenon, here a daily occurrence, is rare throughout the rest of the world. Indeed, few men have ever seen the absolute reversal of light and dark that is happening at this moment. Wasn't it something like this, Nick, that prompted you to invent photography?"

"In Le Gras," answered Niépce, "this magic happens only at wide intervals, when one of the Great Alpine Rhinoceroses decides to visit a lowland cousin. I believe that it was in 1826 that the Mont Blanc Rhinoceros passed my estate on some journey or another, and spent the night behind the house. I stayed up the entire night, making notes and drawings of the many aspects of the visual convulsions and spatial distortions that occurred in his presence. In the morning,

he left, and our locale again returned to normal.

"The next day, I questioned my servants and the villagers and discovered a remarkable fact. No one but myself had noticed the beast or the unusual phenomenon.

"I began to prepare for his return. I had noticed that many substances began to glow when under his influence, and I had made a list of these substances. Surely this was the answer to the question that had occupied my thoughts for so many years. I believed that I could, with the aid of the passing Rhinoceros, fix on a lithographic stone, or a metal plate, or a piece of paper, an image formed by rays of light.

"I had a camera built, and began to coat various substances on stones, plates, wood, and paper. Among the substances I used were the following: paté de foie gras, truffles, olive oil, rubber cement, fish fertilizer, bubble bath, Blue Ribbon Pure Malt Extract, peanut butter, peat moss, orange marmalade, and laundry detergent.

"In each of the mixtures I put some muriate of silver and some of those unspeakable substances with which you are familiar. Then, I had only to wait for the Rhinoceros to pass.

"Again he spent the night in my courtyard, and again I was up all night exposing my plates with the lens of the camera pointed directly at him from Claude's window.

"The results, certainly, are familiar to you. The mixture containing peat moss, malt, and laundry detergent was found to give

the best results.

"The heliograph usually entitled 'View from a Window at Le Gras' should be entitled, instead, 'View of the Great Mont Blanc Rhinoceros from a Window at Le Gras.'"

In Conclusion, the Postmaster Reveals the Nature of Photography

The Postmaster has sat for years on the Rhinoceros' nose, listening for the rare pronouncements that find their way into the world. Each time the Rhinoceros spoke, the Postmaster would write the pronouncement on a post card, and drop it into the mailbox.

Here are a few of these pronouncements, courtesy of the Dead Letter Office:

1. Light is the blood of the universe.
2. Transformation is true magic.
3. Photography is better living through alchemy.
4. A silver image is both silver and an image. Photography is metal work, though in an abstract way.
5. The white metal blackens in my presence. Photography is thus an enigma.
6. Non-silver processes become their own precious metals, in time.
7. Only he who can contain within himself both light and blackening metal has the chance to become, in time, through the working out of the Grand Process, a Rhinoceros.

We must leave the Rhinoceros. The Postmaster remains seated between his horns, waiting for the second octave of his pronouncements. We can only hope that they will come. Meanwhile, we ourselves continue to explore his alchemy in a very practical way.

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