

Bill Jones: The Land of Silent Light

By Thomas McEvelley

I thought of playing a tune and then I felt ashamed in front of the other world, the one that watches me from beyond the night within my light...

—George Seferis

A caption of a photograph by Bill Jones from 1987 says, “transparent materials...were placed directly in the enlarger as if they were photographic negatives.”¹ In terms of its process, this simple description applies to much of Jones’s most characteristic work since 1982. His pictures are, in other words, photograms. In a photogram by, say, Man Ray, one has a dark room or space; this corresponds to the light tight-body of the camera. A sheet of photographic paper is exposed in the darkness and an object is placed upon it. Then a light is flashed from behind the object, at the object and the paper it lies upon. An image of the shadow of the object is retained on the paper. In comparison with the process of the camera itself, there is no lens involved, but everything else is there: the dark box, the paper, the independent object being photographed, and the controlled admission of light. Only the lens is missing.

In much of his recent work Jones has used a variant form of the photogrammic method. There is the dark room there is the paper lying exposed in the dark like someone lying back and awaiting a lover, vulnerable but protected by darkness. And there are the lenses—perhaps an actual photographic lens or two but perhaps in consort some other transparent material, such as a glass globe or the base of a lamp—and there is the controlled admission of light. But in Jones’s case, unlike Man Ray’s there is another element missing from the process: there is no external object. The external object of course, is the element which in ordinary photography, is the whole point; the object that one desires to possess an image of, the object which completes the subject-object relationship. In Jones’s method the subject remains pure subject, without the object; the process does not point out at the world at all, but solipsistically at itself alone. It is the distortion of the passage of the light by the lens that leaves an impression on the paper. It is the light itself—not the dark shadow of an opaque object—that enters as the lover and fulfills the beloved’s vulnerability. The photographic moment is not of this world; it is a rendezvous in a dark room with a being of light, a being whose substance is light itself. The paper lies back like Psyche, “mind” openly awaiting intervention, till the arrival of cupid, the light penetrating desire.

Acting as he does as an intermediary between a realm of light and a realm of darkness, or as the impresario of their coming together, Jones might be called a metaphysical or occult photographer—the word occult pointing to an art which evokes ghostly presences. Kasmir Malevich, in describing his Suprematist images, remarked that they showed three dimensional objects just as they were fading into the fourth dimension. They are liminal, in other words, just accessing a threshold from one metaphysical realm to another. Whereas Malevich’s images show figures just fading into a higher realm, Jones’s work reverses the passage over the up-down path, showing visitors from the higher realms as they make brief evanescent appearances here below—like a poem by George Seferis about the reappearances of ancient gods among us.

Man Ray entitled his essay on photography “The Age of Light,”² as if this were a cosmically ordained era like, say the Treta Yuga in Hindu cosmology. Specifically, the Age of Light must be an era when higher beings enter our world and transform it by their presence. Light is the substance of angelic realms, and when a visitor from an angelic realm crosses through the lens into our world, it begins, in its own realm, as a body of light. But in our world the body of light cannot survive with full integrity, so the being arrives hereon our side of the lens, “like,” as Man Ray put it, “the undisturbed ashes of an object consumed by flames.”³

In the Egyptian Book of the Dead the blessed dead—those who make it through the transition-ordeal, passing through the lens from our ashen world to the court of Osiris amid the circumpolar stars—are said to eatlight.⁴ Plato concurs when he says in Phaedrus that each soul has a star that is its vehicle in the supernal realms. In the creation myth of the Book of Genesis the first event upon the earth is precisely the visitation of a celestial light-being whose appearance in response to the first fiat causes time to begin. In the realm of light itself, as Einsteinian theory is precariously close to demonstrating, time either does not exist or is something other than we experience. The English poet Percy Shelley put it succinctly: “Time like a dome of many-colored glass/Stains the white radiance of eternity.” In terms of Jones’s type of photography, the dome of colored glass is the lens with its distortion, like the stain that it acquires in passing through the glass in Shelley’s simile. This stain, or distortion of the passage of light, is itself the image rather than one of the conditions under which another image might be seen. Light passes through the dome of colored glass like a visitor from another realm putting on a garment for here below, like Seferis’s ancient gods and goddesses hiding out in human bodies for slumming in the realm of gross matter.

The angels are white flaming white and the eye that would confront them shrivels.
—Seferis⁵

The initial goal of art seems to have been precisely the desire to contact beings from other realms and induce them to intervene in one’s affairs, or the affairs of ones community. This at least, is what the accumulations of artistic relics from the Cro-Magnon cultures of the Magdalenian and Aurignacian periods would seem to suggest. Interestingly those rites took place in dark caverns deep in the earth, like the darkened body of a camera or the space where the photogram is to be made. The flickering torchlight imprinted the images on the minds of the initiates as on the sensitized paper.

The purpose of ancient rites to establish such contact was to get concessions from the beings contacted. But in Jones’s photography it is not a matter of literally wresting concessions from extra planar visitors. It might more readily be conceived as an experience of being blessed by their presence, except that one knows that their presences are not literal, that they are in a sense pretended. It is, shall we say, not a direct experience of blessedness. There is much more in it of faith than of realization. The artist makes a gesture; not even as enduring as coherent ash, the resonance of the gesture passes through the absence like a fume of smoke that leaves nothing solid behind.

Remember how we used to twist breathlessly through the alleys so as not to be gutted by the headlights of cars.
—Seferis⁶

The history of photography is like some strip of consciousness on which the spectrum of possible views of reality is imprinted visually. At one end of the spectrum is the realm of form, most emphatically every day form, at the other end is the beyond, the formless or near-formless last wisps of evanescent almost-shapes momentarily glimpsed before being sucked into the hyper elegance of sheer absence. In some areas of Buddhist thought this is known as the Land of Eternal Silent Light.⁷ It is a place where nothing really moves—as dust on the staircase is not stirred by the passage of moonbeams; impressions are wispy, slight; all is open, empty.

Jones’s work is like an explorer’s glimpses brought back from forays into that Land—somewhat as Francesco Clemente made a series of paintings portraying the bardo realms of Tibetan afterlife mythology—but more relentless. For Jones this project was not one show among many but an exploration renewed or maintained rigorously from year to year, even decade to decade: a patient quest for glimpses that might be thought of as blinding when beheld in their purity but in the mediated world of perception, are like faint pulses registering on a needle that moves hardly at all on some gauge with no names or numbers on it. The researcher sees it dimly with bleary eyes. It is there, like a message from the other side

of a black hole, which does not quite make it out of the hole into this world, but flashes perceptibly at its threshold for an instant—an instant which the intrepid explorer who has set up his equipment just this side of the black hole triumphantly records, and gamely, wearily, but in some quiet way happily, trudges back to show it to the rest of us.

Oh dark shivering in the roots and leaves! Come forth sleepless form in the gathering silence...the sea will be born again, and the wave will again fling forth Aphrodite...
—Seferis⁸

Notes:

1. Bill Jones: Investigations, Meditations, Lamentations, North Vancouver, Canada, Presentation House Cultural Society, 1991, p.23
2. Man Ray, "The Age of light," in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., Classic Essays on Photography, New Haven, Conn.: Leete's Island Books, 1980, pp.167-168
3. Ibid p. 167.
4. This theme runs throughout the texts. See for example E.A. Wallis Budge, trans., The Egyptian Book of the Dead, New York, Dover, 1967, p.326.
5. George Seferis, Collected Poems 1924-1955, translated, edited and introduced by Edmond Keeley and Philip Sherrard, London: Jonathan Cape, 1967, p. 253.
6. Seferis, p.77
7. Thomas Cleery, No Barrier, Unlocking the Zen Koan, New York, Bantam Books.
8. Seferis pp. 427, 359.
