

**ON SEEING**

By J. Hill Hamon

I have been thinking about photography lately - along lines of thought hitherto strange to me. There is something eerie about photographs - especially portraits - especially portraits of people deceased - especially deceased for a long time. I have always worshipped the potential of cameras and lenses to produce images that are sharp and clear and visually strong and, of course, permanent. I still revere the images created by Ansel Adams. They are eternal. Perhaps I am attracted by the permanent, eternal qualities of big, sharp, beautiful photographs. I have always striven for these qualities, and consider them photographic virtues, but am beginning to have some personal doubts. We don't see as the camera does! Adams' pictures are surrealistic in that no one views scenes as a camera. We see poorly, unsharply (if there is such a word), vignetting a glimpse of this detail and that, with only a tiny part of our visual field sharp at any given moment. Images not in the fovea of the eye are blurred, tentative, as loosely defined as most thoughts. It is only when we sample our environment with dozens of tiny eye-snapshots that we have the illusion that we see things clearly and sharply. Ansel Adam's photos are overall as sharp and brilliant as we hope to see - as we perhaps think we see. Alfred Steiglitz once commented that the poorest camera was

better than the best photographer, and I believe I am beginning to see why.

The poorest camera available anywhere today is the Diana, a flimsy little thing, molded from thin plastic. The lens is a simple meniscus also made of plastic, and rife with the worst kinds of chromatic aberrations and astigmatism. But we see like the Diana. More alarming, we think as poorly as the Diana sees! Books, at least some of them, are analogous to those big, sharp, clear, contrasty, beautiful photographs. They are also surrealistic because no one thinks in the clear logical manner a book is organized. Perhaps Faulkner was trying to demonstrate this blunt, simple truth in his "Absolem, Absolem." We are taught from birth to be very clever at self-deception, both in the way we see, and in the way we think. We convince ourselves that we see as sharply as a photograph produced in a big camera, and that we think as clearly as most books are organized and written. In reality, our minds are cluttered with the same soft, fuzzy images equated with pictures made with that terrible uncorrected plastic lens on the Diana. With such incredible handicaps, what chance do we have at successfully communicating with one another. How can anyone accurately communicate personal vague views of reality to anyone else - especially through speech, or in writing, or in photographs? We seem to be eternally optimistic in attempting to do so, as ignorant as we are of this simple truth. I guess some people never realize this in a lifetime. Perhaps this is a fair definition of idealism.



This article was reprinted from one of my *Ink Cahoots* pages published some years ago. J. Hill Hamon, 1515 Evergreen Road,

Frankfort, KY 40601. [KyHamon@aol.com](mailto:KyHamon@aol.com). All of my  
photography today is filmless – digital.