

THAT WHICH IS BETWEEN A PERSON AND NATURE

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ABSTRACT

Some photographs capture and reaffirm the conceived connection between a person and nature. Six original laser art color prints reveal six emergent qualities descriptive of this important, reoccurring theme in psychology and art.

PRESENTATION

At the 1983 poster session for the association's annual convention, I presented three basic themes in psychology and art: Person to Person, person to object, and person to nature. My purpose here is to articulate in more detail and through photography six aspects which can be thought to comprise much of the third theme.

Nature provides the nascent and still most fundamental context for human affairs. In our daily living, we perceive ourselves to some degree in a natural world. We conceive of ourselves as standing in a figure to ground relationship with nature. When indoors the relationship is subtle, but outdoors it becomes real. Despite the out-of-doors impact we experience, most maintain a rather egocentric position. They tend to insist on a separation from nature. Nature becomes a backdrop, a place to conquer and control, a visit, a playground, or a route to some specified destination. But for others, it is an extension of ourselves and a part of home.

Be it a backdrop or a home, it is through our interactions with nature that we formulate conceptions regarding our relationship to nature. We learn to use our surrounding resources and come to depend on them. Yet, even though much of our lives are consumed within the walls of our architectural and technological constructions, most of us cannot be isolated entirely from nature. We remain vulnerable to seasonal and even daily climatic changes. While some labor to avoid the elements, weeds and earthy impediments, others repeatedly seek out grandiose vistas and outdoor adventures. The pleasure and pain, self-renewal, and personal meaning reaped from these experiences in the outdoors contribute further to the many-sided person to nature theme.

A photograph of a person in natural surroundings will to a degree capture that which is between a person and nature. For example, one common form in which this theme becomes manifest is the photograph of a person appearing in the foreground of an pastoral, coastal or mountain landscape. The perceiver views the person in relation to nature. The emergent qualities coming from studying the photograph can fall into several categories described below. Such photographs present a composition which appears to generate these emergent qualities, or at least, emanates a configuration which makes it highly probable that the viewer will perceive a particular aspect of the person to nature theme. To the extent that a photograph can yield one to many aspects of the relationship represents one chief criterion for judging the extent to which the photograph captures that which is between.

Six original prints, selected from the author's collection, will illustrate nicely the reflections outlined above. Each piece presented is a laser art enlargement of the original 35 mm color slide. Each color photograph attempts to capture at least one aspect (emergent quality) of the reoccurring theme in psychology and art, that which is between a person and nature.

A description of each photograph and the emergent quality it captures follows. Where the photographs may have a degree of artistic appeal, the emergent qualities contain information of psychological significance.

Photograph A: Pragmatic.

Of what use is an old tree?

Two children are playing on a large fallen tree. The large size of the tree and the diversity of its branches provide a wonderful natural playground full of delightful twists and curls for the adventuresome climber. This photograph, taken in June 1978 on the Oregon coast just north of Sunset Beach, illustrates the pragmatic aspect of the person to nature theme.

A person acts on or takes from nature. Nature provides, yields and sustains. Nature is useful to human beings. Nature serves a function in human affairs. The person acts but may or may not consider the consequences of action. A person presumptuously moves to use nature, expects to receive, and may or may not give in return. This is the pragmatic aspect of the person to nature theme.

Photograph B: Hedonic.

Is it fun to make a splash in nature?

My nine year old son is running into the ocean. As he does, drops of water spray upward and the camera clicks. He is playing with the wave, trotting to and from the water. This photograph was taken in April 1983 at Ocean Beach, San Francisco, California. It conveys the hedonic aspect of the theme.

A person experiences pleasure and pain. Nature is a prime source for these experiences. In our culture play is highly associated with pleasure. The interplay between my son and the ocean is but one elementary example of the pleasure derived from excursions in nature. This is the hedonic aspect of the person to nature theme.

Photograph C: Aesthetic.

Can beauty be between the eyes of the hiker and you?

A hiker stands on the edge of a mountain lake in the high sierras. She looks across the reflecting waters at the variegated treeline and crisp moving cloud pattern surrounding her. This picture was taken in August 1982 at Sunrise Lake, Yosemite National Park, California.

The aesthetic quality of the photograph is unquestionably in the perceived beauty of the scenery. However, my contention is that such a perception, which frequently leads to elegance, awe and wonder, is meaningful to the viewer primarily in relation to the person in the picture. The person provides proportion to the surroundings. At the moment of perception, the viewer is placed in the position of the hiker. Thus, the photograph captures the aesthetic aspect between the hiker and the sierras.

Photograph D: Therapeutic.

In nature does she dream or does she see?

A woman crouches high on the rocks. She appears to be in deep contemplation. Her elbows sit on her knees and her head rests in her palms. Paradoxically, she appears to be staring into the calm ocean waters. A seagull breaks the sky, flying distantly above her. Taken in September 1982 at Pacific Grove, California, this picture depicts a therapeutic quality which many people obtain from solo visits to natural settings of refuge.

Immersion in nature for many represents a break from work routine or troublesome interpersonal relationships. Time in nature brings calm and relaxation. A person can restore a balanced perspective toward loved ones, friends and coworkers. A person can reassess and reaffirm values and beliefs. When the photograph communicates this curative and healing quality of being in nature, the viewer perceives the therapeutic aspect of the person to nature theme.

Photograph E: Metaphoric.

What of symbolic meaning connects the boy to rock and wave?

A boy stands juxtaposed to a large rock. A huge wave is breaking over it. The immense impact of the wave against the rock dwarfs the boy's presence. This photograph was taken in April 1983 near the Sutro Baths and Cliff House, San Francisco, California. It conveys the metaphoric aspect of the person to nature theme.

The viewer readily attempts to conjure words to describe what is seen. These words can have symbolic meanings other than the elements comprising the photographic composition. Waves against rocks adjacent to the onlooker provide a rich source of metaphors exemplary of human experience. That which is between the boy, wave and rock remind us of the omnipotence of nature as well as our vulnerability. The power and energy of the wave and the steadfastness of the rock mysteriously compliment the timidity of the onlooker. Again, the perceiver places himself with the onlooker at the moment of perception. Metaphors for power, energy and humility emerge. This metaphoric aspect of the person to nature theme is much more subtle than the other aspects described above.

Photograph F: Philosophic.

What verity stems from the couple and what they see?

Two hikers sit in the foreground, their backs to the camera. They look across the meadow and up at the snow covered mountain. Taken in August 1983 at Lake Elizabeth meadow, Yosemite National Park, California, this picture illustrates the philosophic aspect of the theme.

Some photographs appear to capture a verity, a pervasive and unchanging truth. The inseparability of a human being from nature, the dependency of a person on nature, and the reliability of change in nature are three verities exemplary of the person to nature theme. The extent to which a photograph can present a composition from which the perceiver derives such a verity is the extent to which the photograph has a philosophic quality.