

Mama, Don't Take Our Kodachrome Away

by A. D. Coleman

In a classic episode of the cartoon strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, the young Calvin — having just found and perused the family album — comes to his father with a burning question: Why are all the pictures before the middle 1940s in black& white, and those thereafter all in color? His father pauses for a moment, then answers gravely that the *world*, reality itself, was black & white until that time, and only turned to color circa 1945. He's engaged in the age-old parental prerogative of creative warping, mischievously planting some disinformation in his offspring's mind. Yet it's plausible to Calvin, though he's a bright kid — and I can identify with his gullibility because even for someone like myself, born in the 1940s and raised during the Kodachrome era, the remembered world of that period is largely black& white.

Of course, what I'm remembering is not an actual monochrome environment but pictures — lens-derived images that, up to and through the decade after World War II, remained primarily black & white: all the family snapshots, and also the formal portraits of my parents and grandparents; most of the still photographs I saw in books and magazines, all of the ones I encountered in newspapers; the Saturday-morning serials and the newsreels and feature-length movies I watched in theaters in France, England, and the U.S. through the early Fifties; and also the television programs that came into our living room when we got our first set circa 1954.

By the middle '50s, Hollywood films and home movies and commercially processed amateur slides and prints already came in color, and color TV broadcasts had begun (though color sets were not yet commonplace). So the transition to a full-spectrum photographic rendering of the world took place comparatively quickly, especially in the booming postwar economy of the U.S., where the added expense of working with color film and prints and slides and reproducing color images in print became affordable to amateur and professional photographers, publishers, and others in fairly short order.

Nonetheless, the experience of seeing the world represented predominantly in black & white certainly shaped those of us born before mid-century. Today, of course, representation of the world in color is the standard, with black & white a decreasingly popular option. (Notably, though, it lives on as a push-button choice on most digital cameras.) It has become commonplace for still photographers — even in the photo-art realm, where black & white held sway longer than in any other mode — to work in color; virtually all film and TV is automatically produced in color, as is most press photography and photojournalism and advertising photography and studio portraiture and casual snapshooting. We take color photography for granted, in short. And that makes it hard to convey to anyone born post-1960 the before-and-after implications of the arrival of a mass-market version of color photography.

This development did not constitute merely a minor technological change. Color photography is a medium in itself, different on many levels from its monochrome predecessors. It conveys additional layers of information, makes different demands on those who choose to work with it, constructs a vastly different microcosm for its viewers. Having the choice to work in black & white or color, in itself, transformed photographic practice. And, on a larger scale, it shifted what we expected from photographic images as consumers thereof.

Monochrome photographs, after all, whether black & white or sepia-toned or cyanotype, inherently signal to us — by the very absence of full color in their representation of the world — that they're abstractions, derivations, something other than the situations and objects and spaces they depict. By eliminating that obvious evidence of the transformative function of photography, and giving us a represented world that more effectively replicates the world as we see it with our own eyes, color photography makes the medium that much more transparent, credible, and effectively illusory: more tactile, more sensory, more persuasive, less like reports about reality and more like actual slices of the real.

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This hefty compendium of images that you hold in your hands, a cross-section of examples of what professional photographers produced during the early days of color film's ready availability, constitutes a direct look at that moment of tectonic shift in the

way we saw and understood our world and our culture. It covers an approximately twenty-year span, from the late 1930s through the late 1950s, and actually represents work made with a number of color films and papers from that period, of which Kodachrome now stands as the best-known and the only survivor — one whose trade name came to define a new way of seeing and describing anything that appeared before a camera's lens.

The collection before you does not pretend to cover the entire span of imagery produced in color during those two decades. Excluded entirely is amateur photography, in all its diversity. So is scientific and advertising photography. Not represented here, either, are the intriguing but generally small-scale experiments in color of some of that period's most significant art photographers, such as Harry Callahan, Ansel Adams, and Edward Weston.¹ The pictures gathered here come mostly from the files of widely distributed general-audience magazines and a few government archives, such as the Library of Congress's Farm Security Administration holdings. Thus they tell us primarily how working photographers (and picture editors, and art directors) applied the potentials of this new medium to documentary purposes, to photojournalism, to the depiction of fashion and interior decoration, to celebrity portraiture, and to what we'd now call "photo opportunities" in the political sphere.

Within those boundaries, this book actually constructs two parallel universes. One is an equivalent of the 1950s as most of us remember them pictorially, vibrant in color, with personalities to match: Joe Louis and Joe DiMaggio, Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe, Fabian and Elvis Presley, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier, Eleanor Roosevelt and Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, Harry Belafonte and Brigitte Bardot, Jackie Robinson and Marlon Brando, Eero Saarinen and Christian Dior. And events of major and minor significance: a NATO conference, the Korean War, nuclear tests in the Pacific from 1950 and 1954, the Cuban Revolution, the Japanese tattoo artist Tokumitsu Uchida at work on a female

¹ Color photography would not find anything more than marginal acceptance in the photo-art realm until the middle 1970s. For a discussion of that moment, see my essay, "Is Criticism of Color Photography Possible?" in my collection of essays, *Tarnished Silver: After the Photo Boom, Essays and Lectures 1979-1989* (Midmarch Arts Press, 1996), pp. 122-128.

canvas, teddy boys in London, Sugar Ray Robinson in front of his Harlem restaurant and business (with what may have been the world's longest pink Cadillac convertible). This symbolizes the beginning of celebrity culture in the U.S., and marks a new stage in the ongoing process by which, through the medium of photography, events from near and far coexist and become curiously equalized.

The second — and certainly more surprising — miniverse you'll find here is an unexpected visual alternative to the period just before, during, and immediately after World War II, in which images indelibly engraved in memory as black & white appear, startlingly, in full color — and not in any sense "colorized." Jack Delano's and Russell Lee's Depression-era documentation for the F.S.A.; Berlin illuminated at midnight for Hitler's 50th birthday in 1939, and the World's Fair in New York that same year; the entirety of the war, from the U.S.S. California ablaze at Pearl Harbor to D-Day at Normandy; Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at the Yalta Conference; V-E and V-J Day, aboard ships in the Pacific and at Times Square; the liberation of Buchenwald and women rebuilding a destroyed Berlin; the proceedings against Hideki Tojo in Japan and the Nuremberg trials in post-Nazi Germany; the founding of the United Nations . . . these appear here not as they were shown to us at the time in the mass media (and as they now reside in our collective unconscious), but — even when made by the same photographers who produced the now-standard variants of these iconic images — replenished and revitalized by a real-life version of the cinematic trick of bringing a scene into the present by shifting from a monochrome to a color version thereof.

These sometimes disorienting substitutions challenge our received version of twentieth-century history simply by showing it to us in a different visual format and suggesting that we consider the effect of modes of representation on our sense of the past.

As western culture's attention turned (at long last) to photography in the late decades of the twentieth century, we found ourselves brought to the recognition that photography has not just one but many histories — a different presence within each of the many countries the medium penetrated, certainly, but also a variety of effects within

each cultural context, resulting not just from the influence of the prominent work of noteworthy picture-makers but also from the pervasive quotidian operations of the medium that we tend to take for granted. Indeed, if there is indeed one truth that must underlie any future unified field theory of the histories of photography, it is that those histories include all the photographs ever made, as well as all the people who produced them, who are represented in them, and who laid eyes on them.

We've just begun to address the truth that most of the world's output of photography — including the imagery harvested for this book — is produced well outside the narrow confines of the arena of photo-art activity. What we broadly call *applied* or *vernacular photography* — the latter a rubric encompassing everything from the amateur snapshot to various forms of professionally made imagery with a functional purpose — has its own imperatives. And those have often been the driving forces behind the medium's evolution. The development of photographic tools and materials, for example, responds primarily to the demands from amateur photographers on the one hand and professionals working in the various applied modes on the other. These mundane market forces thus to a considerable extent determine what kinds of cameras and films the industry will produce — and those decisions, in turn, have aesthetic consequences. For one thing, they largely dictate the toolkit that all photographers have at their ready disposal; for another, they shape the imagery that results, thereby forming the omnipresent visual environment of lens-based representations that we all inhabit nowadays.

By far the majority of applied or vernacular images have people as their subjects — hardly a surprising priority in a photographic culture.² Moreover, the technological development of applied and vernacular photography has always moved towards an increasing capacity to encode an ever greater amount of data: image sharpness and clarity reflect this concern most obviously, but so does the impulse toward color —

² That, too, has had its impact on the technology. To give just one pertinent example, the entire tonal palette of Kodachrome was premised on the necessity of rendering in a pleasing manner the skin tones of those who would be its principal consumers: Caucasians. All of this film stock's color relationships were determined by that priority. Fuji Color film, for the same reason, has as its reference point the coloration of Orientals. See Winston, Brian, "A Whole Technology of Dyeing: A Note on Ideology and the Apparatus of the Chromatic Moving Image," in *Daedalus*, Volume 114, no. 4 (Fall 1985), pp. 105-123.

which, aesthetics aside, is first and foremost another kind of data.

There is ample evidence in the literature of photography to suggest that the original ideal of virtually all the inventors of photography was a color imaging system. In fact, it is quite likely that, had a technically viable form of color photography been achieved at the outset, the medium might never have passed through the monochrome phase that still comprises the bulk of its history — or might have experienced it as little more than a minor offshoot.

This is more than mere hypothesis. In terms of the medium's technological evolution, color photography lagged well behind monochrome. George Eastman's first Kodak — the one requiring only that "you press the button" — was introduced in 1888, making monochrome photography available to the general public. It was not until 1936, almost half a century later, that Kodachrome, a color film made to fit all the standard small-camera formats, and the first which could be exposed at snapshot speeds by available light — that is, a color film that, though widely used by professionals, did not require professional equipment and expertise — was placed on the market.

What we learned from that experiment was that whenever the technology and economics of color photography have come abreast of monochrome closely enough to be competitive with it, color is automatically preferred — whether the medium is still photography, movies, video, or (now) digital imaging. Small wonder, then, to find a poet like Paul Simon singing "Kodachrome/They give us those nice bright colors/They give us the greens of summers/Makes you think all the world's a sunny day . . ." Color photography, both still and kinetic, has shaped the contemporary vision of the world. Especially via the applied and vernacular usages and forms of color photography, the primacy of color in photography has been established by democratic vote. By the same token, those omnipresent usages have formed our understanding of what color photography is.

So the cumulative history and tradition of color photography that we have internalized as members of photographic culture have little to do with current tendencies in contemporary art photography and "photo-based art," in which delimited territories color photography has been prominent only since the middle 1970s. Our cultural

relationship to color photography derives much more clearly from the intensely saturated reds in the My Lai massacre photographs, the breathtaking spreads in magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Vogue*, and the "nice bright colors" that we fell in love with, not formally installed on gallery walls but reproduced in the pages of popular magazines, embedded in glossy drugstore prints, printed on movie posters and billboards, and projected onto the glittery surface of cheap folding screens in our darkened living rooms. In short, it emerges from images such as those presented to you here.

The photographs in this anthology have many levels of resonance and poignancy, individually and collectively. Each viewer brings his or her own associations to them, for, just as they encode fragments of our cultural history, we in turn comprise living repositories of that same material. Of the dozens of classic images here that I find deeply meaningful, I would close by pointing you to two, both of which contain pictures within pictures: Ralph Morse's unprepossessing 1951 record of a color TV screen, made during the first week of regular U.S. broadcast of color television signals, and J. R. Eyerman's 1958 study of a Utah drive-in movie theater at dusk, with Charlton Heston as a wrathful Moses on the screen.

Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* was, at that time, the most spectacular and perhaps the most ambitious movie of its day, an attempt to put the Old Testament on celluloid (and, of course, on Kodachrome stock). That early TV show, by way of contrast, came from a mundane homemaker's show that gave instruction on cooking a strawberry shortcake. The first seems monumental, the second trivial; few would have thought to compare the two. Yet by the time DeMille released his magnum opus television had already begun to replace the movies in our lives, as color photography was already inexorably replacing black & white.

The world changed forever during the period covered by the remarkable photographs in this book, and these images not only describe many of those profound alterations but embody one of them: the way in which our visual representation of the world we inhabit would come to replicate that world ever more accurately and thus more convincingly, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two. "New York," says a character in one of Stevie Wonder's songs from the 1970s, " — just like I

pictured it!" Which of course means just as it was "pictured" to him, in movies and television shows and magazine layouts and postcards. In living color. In Kodachrome.

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