





RICHARD WHITE

# Instant, Insistent History

Photographs by Jesse White

All photographs are historical photographs. Conventionally, photographs qualify as historical only as artifacts; their content is irrelevant. Their age—the temporal distance from us—is what matters. Historical photographs need to originate in a distant past and travel through time, surviving its vicissitudes. They arrive in the present carrying their baggage of images of places gone or altered. Only then do we consider what they contain to be history.

This is very odd. Consider a photograph of an old man. It can count as a historical picture of an old man only when the photograph as well as the man is old. That the man in the picture is old, that the chair he sits in is old, and that the house that contains the chair is old—none of these things matter. The past that is present in the photograph is immaterial.

“In a photograph, you are trapped in this one timeless instant of time,” Erroll Morris has written. This seems nonsensical. How can an instant of time be timeless? But it is only paradoxical. In a photograph, we see the preservation of a fleeting moment. Photographs preserve the ephemeral. If nothing in the frame can ever change, if all the things that happened afterward in the place pictured go unrecorded, then the captured instant is, in a sense, timeless.<sup>1</sup> It certainly cannot look forward.

The idea that a photograph captures only an instant of time is not so much false as incomplete. A photograph possibly anticipates what comes next, but photographs, particularly artful photographs, are chock full of the shadows of what came before, which is to say history. All the people and objects within photographs are the products of events and relationships that took place prior to the click of the shutter.<sup>2</sup>

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Here are two photographs taken in June of 2014 by Jesse White in Tulare County. They each capture a segment of the past at once stranded in and part of a present.

Visually both photographs center on isolated vertical features erupting in overwhelming horizontal landscapes. Both center on artifacts not immediately explained by the landscape surrounding them. Both trace patterns of change going back over a century. Both are as much questions as statements.

These photographs can stand alone, but as freestanding objects—whether art or journalism—they are vulnerable to a danger John Berger pointed out some time ago. Isolated, each can become “a dead object,” which is “severed from all lived experience.” They are not pictures in a family album that trigger memories and stories. While the photographer lives and remembers, the photograph can spawn stories, but they are only the photographer’s story. In this case, they might revolve around how Jesse came to see the object and frame the shot. They will involve locating the scene in space. The stories can spin off into how he came to be there, what

he ate, what played on the radio during or after the shot. Given the month and his habits, it was most likely a Detroit Tigers game.

Severed from memory and story, the photograph becomes, in Berger’s words, dead, and “exactly because it is dead, lends itself to any arbitrary use.” It becomes the stuff of *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*: lost objects woven into a fanciful story unconnected with the objects’ origins or any truth about what they portray. There is certainly room for fantasy, but the world, past and present, is far more than fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

There are stories, and then there are stories. The photographer can take us only so far. Jesse’s memories of the photograph revolve largely around the day in June 2014 when he took the picture. The photograph, however, contains far more than he or any photographer can ever know in the instant they shoot a picture.

I, like any knowledgeable viewer, can see more than the photographer saw when the shutter clicked. This, I realize is a bold claim. Erroll Morris says photographs are “collections



of mystery stories,” and I guess they are. They prompt questions to which I do not always have answers, but even though I cannot explain everything I see, I can explain some of it and recognize what I need to know to explain even more.<sup>4</sup>

Mysteries mean photographs breach their seeming ephemeral moment. The photograph strains against its frame, rooting down into the past, and reaching out into a future that had not yet happened when the shutter clicked. The past is what mainly concerns me here, but the future is also tethered to the photograph because whoever reads this article and looks at these photographs can only do so after Jesse has taken them and after I have written this. Viewers and readers exist only in our future.

The large tree in the first photograph? That is a valley oak, the remnant of an older landscape, but not an original landscape, for where it and the young orchard stands was a century or more ago water: the basin of Tulare Lake, then the largest lake in California but now gone. Outside of the soil and sky, nothing in the frame can be older than the

draining of the lake. Date the oak and you date a change when the grassland that succeeded the lake allowed at least one tree to take root. In between the oak and the orchard were most likely grain fields—although I do not know this for certain. The orchard is but a moment in an agricultural landscape that is anything but timeless.

In the second photograph, the silo replaces the orchard and it, too, captures events older than the photograph. A tree has taken root on the silo roof, which means the silo was abandoned before the tree began to grow. Silos rarely stand alone; there probably was a farm or a ranch here. Certainly, there was grain for why build a silo if there is no grain? When the farmers shifted crops—when grapes, nuts, fruit, and alfalfa filled these fields—the silo was useless. The photograph whispers all these changes. It captures a landscape story, and all landscape stories in hybrid landscapes like this are human stories. The photograph does not tell them fully. Photographs entice us into a not fully explained past.

Explaining that past changes photographs. We rescue them from being arrested and isolated moments. They, in



Berger's words, "reacquire a living context."<sup>5</sup> That living context has to be constructed with words, with other photographs, and through "its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images." What Berger calls an ongoing text I call history.<sup>6</sup>

These two photographs capture intact objects, but photographs have a power that goes beyond that. The traces they capture can be faint, but the past endures in them. F Ranch on the Point Reyes National Seashore is all the more a mystery for not being a mystery. A sign at Point Reyes identifies it, but few people stop because there is no longer a ranch at F Ranch, only a bedraggled grove of Monterey cypress.

Even without the sign, anyone familiar with Point Reyes would know that a human habitation once stood here. At Point Reyes trees always mark human intervention, usually a past in which someone planted and nurtured trees to act as windbreaks or as ornaments. Sometimes, however, it might just mean someone gathered a Bishop pinecone from up on the ridge and discarded it alongside a road.

The obvious story in the photographs of F Ranch is one of decay and also stubborn resilience. What was once a windbreak is now an organic ruin. There are dead and dying trees but also shrubs and trees that have stubbornly rerooted and grown again.

These photographs, however, also gesture toward a past that they cannot alone recover, and this sends me into the archives. The archives contain other photographs, the kind we do mark as historical, and they reveal both other ruins and then, like a film running backward, the ruins restored, the hedges full and trimmed, and the place full of human life. People, now dead, look into the camera. This is what Berger means by reconstructing a living context with words and with other photographs. There is no narrative yet, but there are now more points to be connected and not just time's arrows shooting into the dark.

Like the photographs Jesse took in the winter of 2012, each of these photographs point to other events. How did the house fall into ruin? Who ultimately removed it,





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commemorating its absence with a sign and little more? Who lived here, what did they look like, and how did they live? Each photograph answers some questions and raises others for all contain yet another past.

Finally, the backward reaching trail of photographs arrives in the nineteenth century when the hedge itself was yet to be planted. Even there, the trees indicate a ranch already older than the people who pose before it.

Photographs cannot help but contain a deeper past, moments before the moments of their creation. The events that created the scene in the photograph are as tea leaves to a cup of tea. We strain out the leaves to drink the tea, but they have colored what remains in the cup. Every object in the frame existed before the shutter clicked; some have existed for moments, some days, some years, some centuries, some

for millennia and more. That tree took root decades ago. Someone built that house, that fence, that road. Everything has a history. **B**

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Errol Morris, *Believing Is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 180.
- <sup>2</sup> John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), 50–52, 56.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*; Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011).
- <sup>4</sup> Morris, *Believing Is Seeing*, xxii–xxiii.
- <sup>5</sup> Berger, *About Looking*, 57.
- <sup>6</sup> Morris, *Believing Is Seeing*, xxii–xxiii.





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