

# EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

## Disposable Cameras & The Writerly Eye

# The Writer Snaps

JANET STERNBURG

In what I expect will be a lifelong conversation between writing and taking pictures, I'm finding that the most compelling artistic questions are not ones of metier and allegiance to it, nor about expertise and tools. Rather, they are about being alive and sensate in the world.

During a busy day, to-do lists cluttering our pockets, we might peer into a store window with an object already in mind. Even without the goal of finding a particular object, it's almost automatic to register a selection: *I like this one*, or its corollary, *Not that*. If we take a photograph of that scene, the same mental categories apply: the preferred object is in sharp focus while everything else recedes into fuzziness.

Working with a disposable camera has taught me how to avoid this trap of selective perception. Through the very limitation of its technology—the fact that the disposable doesn't allow the picture-taker to focus or to construct an intentional depth of field—I have learned to suspend preference in favor of seeing a larger picture. I'm discovering all that a single pane of glass—an ordinary store window—can hold.

When I'm drawn to a particular window, I look at objects on display while also registering what is happening behind me, reflected *in* the window. I wait until the instant when all the elements come together, as, for example, in *Reflections in Blue* (see page 5). In the photograph, the man hammering on the roof, top left, is in the compositionally right position, at the same time as another man walks into the circle in the center of the window. Both men are reflections: one behind me on a building across the street, the other on the sidewalk.

I love *reflection*, in all the rich senses of that word. Recently I discovered a poem by Homero Aridjis—from *Eyes to See Otherwise* (New Directions, 2002)—that distills the impulse behind these window images, which I’ve now shot (and exhibited) in many different parts of the world:

... and to his own surprise,  
 he lifted up the fugitive water,  
 held out the transparent stream,  
 and saw the world on its other side.

—Homero Aridjis  
 trans. George McWhirter

I’ve been queried as to whether my photographs are digitally made, and whether they are double exposures or superimpositions. That kind of manipulation is exactly what I *do not* want. I want my work to dip into the transparent stream, where the other side is not the reverse, but rather revelation.

To my mind, razor-sharp clarity does not represent the world. Fortunately for my purposes, the disposable does not render absolutely sharp images, especially not when enlarged to 30 x 40 inches. A little blur is a good thing, allowing for fertile confusion between what’s inside and outside, front and back, solid and fluid. For everyday purposes, we need to say “This one, not that one,” and “Right here, this is inside, but over there is outside.” We need our boundaries to help us negotiate the world. But keeping them rigidly defined isn’t sufficient to the richness of our experiences, nor accurate to their truths.

In writing and photography, I want to evoke a vision of a layered, complicated, multiple, blurred, interpenetrating universe of time and space, past and present, in whatever the medium. What is not disposable is vision.