



The Oregonian

The eloquent nude

Sunday, March 04, 2007

INARA VERZEMNIEKS
The Oregonian

Maybe you've seen her, the woman in the black-and-white photograph: the curve of her arms, the angle of her leg, the way the shadow catches the hollow of her collarbone. It's hard not to feel the intensity with which the photographer has fixed his lens on her; it's harder still not to hope that just once in your life, you will know what it's like for someone to look at you like that.

You saw her fixed to a gallery wall. You saw her frozen on a glossy art-book plate. You saw her, studied her, knew her -- all without ever knowing her name.

"Nude" is all the title says.

Today, the woman in the photograph is 92, approaching the end of her life. The man who took it -- one of the most influential photographers of the 20th century, her lover, husband, creative partner -- died years ago of Parkinson's, after their slow and painful coming apart.

And it's sad to look at that image and know all this. But it's also incredibly touching to look at that image and know all this. One of the bittersweet things about photography is the way that it records what is both present and gone. By the time we press the shutter, the moment we are trying to preserve has already slipped away from us. And yet, a photograph promises a kind of forever -- proof that it is possible to transcend the rules of time.

A moment captured 71 years ago -- a love, a life -- is gone.

That's one way to think about it.

Another way:

A moment captured 71 years ago is still happening.

Can you fall in love at first sight?

Charis and Edward did.

"I have not opened this book for almost 8 months, -- and with good reason; I have been too busy, busy living . . .," Edward Weston wrote in his diary on Dec. 9, 1934. "On 4-22 a new love came into my life, a most beautiful one, one which will, I believe, stand the test of time . . . I met C . . . at a concert, was immediately attracted, and asked to be introduced. I certainly had no conscious designs in mind at the time, but I am not in the habit of asking for introductions to anyone which means that the attraction was stronger than I realized. I saw this tall, beautiful girl, with finely proportioned body, intelligent face well-freckled, blue eyes, golden brown hair to shoulders, -- and had to meet."

In her memoir, "Through Another Lens," Charis (pronounced Care-iss) Wilson, offered her recollections of that night: "We have been keenly aware of each other for several minutes before he surprises me by making his way through the crooked lane of chairs and asking my brother to introduce us . . . Close up I find him even more attractive . . . He looks at me with admiration, and the openness and intensity of that look would be embarrassing if he didn't, at the same time, make it seem playful -- as though we

were sharing a private joke."

She was 19 at the time, the daughter of writer Harry Leon Wilson (of "Ruggles of Red Gap" fame) and Helen Cooke Wilson, a beautiful, but emotionally distant mother.

Charis Wilson was a graduate of Portland's Catlin School, as Catlin Gabel School was known then. So great was her promise that Ruth Catlin, the school's founder, personally directed her to Sarah Lawrence College, where Wilson hoped to fulfill her dream of becoming a writer. She earned a full scholarship, but her father wouldn't let her go. Deeply wounded, she had just spent a lost, "desperately unhappy" year in San Francisco before returning home to Carmel, Calif.

Weston was 48, well on his way to becoming one of the most influential modern photographers in America. Along with such friends and contemporaries as Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, he helped pioneer a straightforward approach to photography that was a radical departure from the soft-focus, staged, metaphor-laden work that had dominated the early 20th century. Weston's stark, unmanipulated photographs channeled the wonder and beauty in the everyday: The secret chambers of a nautilus shell. The sculptural curves of a pepper. The soft flow of a woman's hip.

It would be easy to make an issue of their ages. But this was not a lopsided partnership. In Weston, Wilson found an intimacy and love that had been missing from her life up until then, and the strength of it ultimately helped her to discover who she was. "I had been looking forward to my twenty-first birthday, with its official stamp of adulthood," she writes in "Through Another Lens," "but as things turned out, it was this first summer with Edward that marked my coming of age."

In Wilson, Weston found a true partner, a collaborator. His years with Wilson were the most productive of his life. She would help write his successful Guggenheim application -- making him the first photographer to receive the prestigious fellowship -- and later, she crafted his well-known essays on photography. He created some of his best work with Wilson at his side, and she became the subject of some of his most famous photographs.

Even after their painful separation and divorce, they continued to express a great deal of love and respect for each other.

"What we shared," says Wilson, "was indestructible."

Over the years a lot of people had tried to tell the story of Edward Weston, his life and work and impact. But few have seen the possibilities in telling the story of Edward and Charis.

A couple of years ago, Ian McCluskey, a documentary filmmaker from Portland, happened upon Wilson's memoirs, which had been written with the help of Wendy Madar, a family friend and faculty member at the Center for the Humanities at Oregon State University. Intrigued, McCluskey called Madar, who told him Wilson was living in Santa Cruz. She gave him Wilson's number, and he arranged a visit.

Can you come on a sunny day, Wilson asked. I feel much better on a sunny day.

They ate chocolate and drank Wild Turkey, and Wilson talked about her life with Weston with such tenderness and wit and charm and candor, it was easy to see why the photographer had been so swept away by her.

"Even at 92, when every cell in her body has now voted to go on strike, her spirit is warm and strong," says McCluskey, 34, the founder of Northwest Documentary Arts & Media, a Portland-based nonprofit dedicated to telling the overlooked stories of our region.

He immediately sensed that he had discovered a documentary subject far more nuanced and touching than an ex-wife simply sharing her memories of a famous spouse.

Here was a woman at the end of her life, "looking back on her coming of age, reflecting on the complexity of art and love and loss, and recognizing that love is layered like that -- that it is torn up and beautiful. That sometimes the loss is the beauty."

On Thursday, McCluskey's documentary, "Eloquent Nude: The Love and Legacy of Edward Weston and Charis Wilson," will premiere at the Portland Art Museum's Whitsell Auditorium.

If you go to see it, you will be witnessing the culmination of months of work by McCluskey and dozens of volunteers -- a painstaking re-creation of one couple's history, culled from hours of academic

research and interviews with Wilson, her daughter Rachel Harris and prominent Weston scholars.

But you also will be seeing something else, something far more subtle, yet perhaps the most moving outcome of McCluskey's project: You will see a woman being given the rare opportunity to experience her youth and the end of her life, all at once; that which is simultaneously present and gone.

What if you could meet yourself again in your 20s? What would you say?

One weekend this past fall, McCluskey and several of the people who had been instrumental in the making of the documentary took a road trip to Santa Cruz to show Wilson the film for the first time.

McCluskey is a strikingly sensitive and empathetic soul (in an introductory documentary class he leads, he requires all his students to invite their subjects to the final screening of the class's work, to drive home the point that the stories belong as much to the subjects as to the filmmakers). He was particularly "knotted up" thinking about her response to the film.

He had, in fact, taken a big risk with the documentary.

There weren't any home movies of Wilson and Weston's time together, and that presented a significant problem for McCluskey. He wanted to convey the richness of the couple's relationship and make Edward and Charis come alive in people's minds. "I wanted to give a sense of art in motion," he says, "rather than art at its endpoint."

So, after giving it a great deal of thought, McCluskey decided to find people to re-create some of the couple's more significant moments -- their first photo session together, their epic yearlong road trip that led to the publication of "California and the West" and Weston's iconic photograph of Wilson resting against a rock at Lake Ediza.

Working on a shoestring budget, they camped, just as Weston and Wilson had. They cooked over fires and used borrowed props for their scenes, including McCluskey's mom's coffeepot and a cast-iron skillet from his kitchen. McCluskey, who received a master's in journalism from the University of Oregon, made sure to match each scene as precisely as possible to written records, oral accounts and photographs -- right down to such details as how far to roll the cuff on a pair of jeans.

Still, the only person who could tell them whether they had truly been successful was the woman whose memories they hoped to re-create.

Wilson can no longer see very well, so McCluskey and the crew from Northwest Documentary arranged for a 90-inch TV to be delivered to her home for the private premiere. Harris, her daughter, wheeled her close, and Wilson watched as a photograph of herself in the prime of her life -- achingly beautiful with long braided hair -- appeared on the giant screen.

"Hello, Charis!" she said.

And everyone laughed, but McCluskey was still desperately nervous. So much was still to come. McCluskey had not glossed over the couple's sadnesses -- the collapse of their relationship, Wilson's decision to leave Weston and his subsequent decline from Parkinson's.

Then there were the re-creations.

About halfway through the documentary -- not long after the re-creation of the couple's Guggenheim travels -- McCluskey saw Charis whispering to her daughter, who then asked if they could stop the film.

"My heart stopped," McCluskey says.

Harris told the room she thought everyone might want to hear what her mother had to say:

If Charis' tear ducts hadn't stopped working years ago, Harris said, she'd be swimming in tears.

The effect of the re-creations had been to give her something more than her memories; they had given her a chance to go back.

"That was the first time I started feeling those steel bands of tension snap," McCluskey says.

Still, when it was all over he had to ask Wilson himself, "Is it OK?"

"It's such a fantastic picture," she said.

And it's interesting, really, that she used that word. Not film. Or documentary. But picture.

She went on: "You see this poor old woman having not enough teeth to keep the articulation much more fundamental than it is, and then you see her as a young woman sitting on top of the world and becoming conscious of the fact that that's where she is. It's wonderful. It's absolutely mind-boggling to try to deal yourself the permission to identify with both those people. And, you know, it hasn't much to do with what you're making a record (of), but the record for me is: My God, how could it have happened like that? Isn't that amazing? "

When I called recently, she put it another way.

It's as if scenes from the film are still playing inside her. She says: "I keep seeing a picture, a portrait Edward made of me. I guess either the first sitting or an early one, sitting up, very prim. I keep seeing this flashing before me and telling me: That's who you were."

When you see the documentary, pay particular attention to a scene toward the end, where McCluskey asks Wilson about her last visit with Weston. She is sitting in her wheelchair in the one-room home they once shared, which still stands in Carmel.

At that time, she recalls, Weston was quite debilitated by Parkinson's. She started to pick up some of her books from the shelves and then stopped. "It was like looking at a jaw that had the teeth taken out of it," she says.

She put the books back.

"And that was the last time I saw him."

And in those few words, Wilson, much like one of her lover's photographs, seems to capture something both haunting and transcendent: That perhaps our only true stay against time is in what we leave behind.

And it is what McCluskey, too, has done in his own way, by seeing the potential in the story of Charis and Edward, the story of "losing something so profound, yet at the same time leaving something that lives on in the heart of a 92-year-old woman that is carried forward into complete strangers' lives."

Because of Charis and Edward, he says, you can go to a museum or a gallery and look at one of the black-and-white photos he took of her and be moved by what they created.

"What you are being moved by is life."

©2007 The Oregonian