

preprinted cover just like those on a three-year-old's alphabet primer, is a joy to peruse. Jam-packed with illustrations of Finster's wonderful paintings, it also includes edited transcriptions of nine years of taped interviews. Finster equally delights in telling of his visions and his travels in space and time and in recounting tales of his youth, early marriage, and ministry. Particularly charming are his evocations of rural life in Alabama and Georgia in the '20s and '30s, which seem as distant as paintings by Breughel.

Finster, unschooled and ignorant, but full of love for his fellow creatures and endowed with a prodigious talent, has found for himself the ancient role of the artist-shaman who seeks to heal the world of its wounds and divisions through art. His work is marked by an innocent earnestness that ensures it a wide audience. Years after the trendy neo-expressionists and even trendier simulationists of the past decade have faded in our cultural memory, I suspect Finster's work will be looked at and marveled at — as he looks down on us and marvels from his home on some planet far away.

— David Bonetti

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**THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF INVENTION**, by Joshua P. Smith. MIT Press, 228 pages, \$39.95.

Photography may be 150 years old, but the debate over its status as an art form seems barely out of

its infancy. Although few would admit it, the quarrel centers not so much on credentials such as "vision" and "truth" and other high-minded notions of creativity and art, but on labor intensity — work. Discriminating historians have been very hesitant in granting full-fledged status to images captured in a 60th of a second. It's not that Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" is too brief for them. Or that Weston's "supreme instant" is too fleeting. It's all simply too goddamned fast and, well, easy.

Point-and-shoot technology hasn't helped; indeed, it has only fueled the arguments of those who see the camera's assets — spontaneity, speed, fidelity — as character flaws. A century and a half ago, picture-taking was hard physical work. Today, the medium is as much cerebral as technical.

Recent work by photoartists — their term — is revealing a more or less conscious effort to "slow down" photography, either conceptually or technically, in an attempt to achieve the respectability afforded other media. New photographs are being made, and not merely taken. Pictures are being created, fabricated, computer-generated, fragmented, staged, abstracted, constructed, deconstructed, and recontextualized in order to break down the commonly held distinctions between fine art and photography. And between *photography* and photography.

The 90 American artists featured in *The Photography of Invention* are part of a new breed

of experimenters whose work quite intentionally defies categorization. They are non-traditionalists and outsiders, people more comfortable re-presenting photography than representing it. The book, subtitled "American Pictures of the 1980s," catalogues an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Art marking photography's sesquicentennial. And like most editions produced by MIT Press, its production values are impeccable. The book opens with a 20-page introductory essay by editor Joshua Smith that is both intelligent and down-to-earth, a considerable achievement given the fusillade of contrasting styles and techniques that follows.

Many of the most successful photographs in the exhibition are by women, including Barbara Ess, Barbara Kasten, and Cindy Sherman. Lynne Augeri's *A Warm Night in January* is, more accurately, torrid. And Jacqueline Hayden's *Shore Birds in NYC* is a softly surreal flight of fantasy. But other pieces — those by Lorrie Novak and Todd Watts, for instance — are as indescribable as dreams. Nearly a quarter of the photographs are untitled, and many that are identified are clearly understated. Words like "luminous" and "radiant" only hint at the power of *Yellow Rose*, a reassemblage by the Starn twins that explodes off the page even at 1/14th its actual size.

Serious photographers may experience a sense of liberation after seeing this work, if not from any one particular picture, then from the sheer range of photoartistic expression reflected in the exhibition as a whole. It may not be mature work, but then neither is the medium, really. This book's greatest value, perhaps, rests in its ability to inspire, to encourage others by example. It suggests that labor and sweat will always play a part in the photographic experience, although much of that work now occurs in the brain.

— Don Rubin