Introduction

Most important aspect to life, like joy, sorrow, its moral ideal. Michael Heivly's images of Manzanar are about life. They are a record of the remote (and intact) site of Manzanar, which was lived a particular time in United States history. For me, a person who was not even born during that time, it is like looking at a world we have lost forever. The images of what Manzanar (an internment camp for American citizens) was and what it represented about our national consciousness is about life. It is mostly through the images and the words that we can come to understand how our lives have been shaped by the experiences of our parents and grandparents. While the images do not provide a direct answer to the question of what life was like in Manzanar, they give us a sense of the atmosphere and setting of the camp, which helps us to imagine what it might have been like to live there.

The Received Tradition

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 of 1942 resulted in the largest incarceration of American citizens in their own country in the history of the United States. By the end of 1942, virtually every Japanese American in the United States was living in internment camps. This executive order led to the creation of Manzanar, one of the largest and most famous of these camps. The camp was initially intended to house citizens who were suspected of being members of the Japanese resistance movement or of collaborating with the Japanese government. However, it quickly became clear that the main purpose of the camp was to provide a secure location for the internment of Japanese Americans.

The images in the exhibition and catalog have been funded by the Office of the Vice-President of Academic administration and Provost at California State University, Bakersfield. Those of us in the CSUB Art Department were fortunate to have such a rich and diverse collection of images to work with. The images were carefully selected to highlight the human side of the internment experience. The exhibition was designed to provide visitors with an opportunity to explore the history of the camp and to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of those who lived there.

Heivly’s Work in Context

Michael Heivly’s photographic images seek to change this. More than half a century later, Heivly returns to Manzanar to document the remains of this critical period. This project is particularly challenging, because virtually all that is left of Manzanar is the flat and unyielding earth upon which the camp was built. Heivly’s images emphasize the harsh landscape, as a mirror image of the harsh treatment that was meted out to the Japanese Americans.

Heivly also validates the unique personality of each internee who worked in Manzanar – each signature represents a unique individual. His images movingly illustrates how the Japanese Americans accepted their fate as intrinsically a way of life. In a world where nobody seemed willing to reach out to the Japanese Americans, they had to dig deep within to discover the significance of their lives. In a world where anyone would have been justified in expressing rage or anger at their fate, Japanese Americans felt, even as they worked in difficult conditions. His images focus on the work and creativity of the Japanese Americans, who found ways to create for themselves. They have been uprooted from their communities throughout the United States and have had to start their lives from scratch, creating a new, home and community out of nothing. In this respect, what is being documented – the basic buildings of Manzanar as a city – directly parallels what these documentations represent – the foundations for a new life for the Japanese Americans at Manzanar.

Signature: Witness to an Historic Moment in Time

A second theme in Heivly’s work is the focus on the signatures of those who built the foundations of Manzanar. The signatures represent a way of life. In a world where nobody seemed willing to reach out to the Japanese Americans, they had to dig deep within to discover the significance of their lives. In a world where anyone would have been justified in expressing rage or anger at their fate, Japanese Americans felt, even as they worked in difficult conditions. His images focus on the work and creativity of the Japanese Americans, who found ways to create for themselves. They have been uprooted from their communities throughout the United States and have had to start their lives from scratch, creating a new, home and community out of nothing. In this respect, what is being documented – the basic buildings of Manzanar as a city – directly parallels what these documentations represent – the foundations for a new life for the Japanese Americans at Manzanar.
ML Heivly

Images of Manzanar

Repetitions and Continuity: Meditations on the Earth

Heivly’s photographs are not only documentary, but also meditative. Repetition helps viewers physically slow down as they move through the exhibit, allowing them to meditate on what it truly means for Manzanar to have existed. These repetitions help to remind us that what happened at Manzanar happened to ordinary people who lived ordinary lives, just like our own.

The photograph of each signature is accompanied by a highly underexposed image of an actual site that has been built. The ghost-like image is a metaphorical memory trace of the effort and work of the creators of Manzanar. The combination documents the co-dependence between the individuals who created Manzanar and the community who lived there, and between the Manzanar of five decades ago and what remains of Manzanar today. These connections mediate continuity with the past, reinforce forgotten memories, and lay the foundation for new memories that had previously been impossible.

Heivly creates these links between the individual and the community, the past and the present, by using two formal techniques – the adding of the actual soil of the site to the photographs, and the blurring of the edges of the photographs.

The first technique – the literal addition of soil from the site to the actual photographs we see here – is a strong reminder that the soil is not merely a metaphor for Manzanar, but rather it is Manzanar, literally.

The actual soil, then, is a reminder of the continuing memory trace that the site has for us and our history, as well as an enduring presence that the site will continue to have in the future. Incorporating soil into the work not only serves to document the past, but also to draw the past into our own present. Infused with Manzanar’s soil, the images become the site.

Similarly, the blurred edges cause the image to dissolve into our own reality, reminding us that we cannot escape our own moral responsibility for what occurred there. Heivly’s work reclaims the moral and historical responsibility for what happened at Manzanar, reversing the dulling effect of time on our memories, and reminding us of what we must never forget.

Heivly bridges the past and the present, Manzanar and our own lives with the blurred edges of his photographs. By blurring the edges of the photographs, he blurs the lines between the past and present, and the memories that they create blurred into our own memories. As a result, the site and the history of Manzanar are connected to our own lives and our own experiences.

Envisioning these stirring disjunctions provokes us to consider how we shape our own lives and the lives of those around us. It reminds us to be sensitive to how our own actions necessarily impact other people’s lives. Heivly’s work is a subtle and eloquent reminder that we have a moral responsibility to remember the past – both to ourselves and to our future.

Conclusion

Unlike previous photographs of Manzanar that seek merely to document the past, Heivly’s work includes and东海 that past beyond mere description. He works to ensure that all life has an inherent moral worth. He portrays the Japanese American as having found their own internal peace with their situation, and as having lived their lives with a quiet dignity. His images of Manzanar may help us see that the value of humanity can be found anywhere under any circumstances.

-Sandra Bacharach, PhD

Todd Madigan Gallery

California State University, Bakersfield

April 8 - April 24, 2003

Nothing worth doing can be understood in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.

-Reinhold Niebuhr