

INTERVIEW: DENNY MOERS ON AARON SISKIND

James Barron: The last time Denny and I saw one another was in 1980. I was a student at Brown; Denny was the printer for Aaron Siskind. I was working at a gallery called Jeb Gallery, which was a photo gallery, at a time when people weren't completely convinced that photography was a fine art.

My parents came in—they were visiting me at Brown—and they bought 22 Siskinds. They just fell in love. Then I introduced them to Denny and to Aaron, and they loved both of you. This show portrays Aaron as “a painter’s photographer,” which is a quote from Elaine de Kooning. We paired his work with works from his contemporaries, many of whom were part of the AbEx group that met at Studio 35. They were all completely impoverished, and they would go to dinner and work out ideas. Then, there’s Black Mountain College. Let’s start there: you did your thesis on Black Mountain.

Danny Moers: Black Mountain was really an essential place in my consciousness once I became aware of it, because it incorporated both writers and visual artists, both faculty and students. The list of who’s who includes Rauschenberg and Johns, Siskind and Callahan and Merce Cunningham. It had Josef Albers as the first director. He came with a certain more formal sensibility. Then he left, and this avant-garde poet, Charles Olsen, came on as director, and that’s the period that I was familiar with. His sensibility was so different from Albers’. I just realized that these artists that I admired so much were students and/or faculty there – in the middle of nowhere, in the mid-1950s! They would go there mostly for the summer, if they weren’t regular students. Some would come for the summer every year for two or three years. Of course, it didn’t last very long. It was in Highlands, North Carolina. You had some of the first installation art between John Cage and Cunningham being staged in the summer. It was an incredible institution. I just immersed myself in that culture. So that was my idea of writing a thesis, merging my ideas of the poets and writers there.

JB: Did Aaron talk about his time there?

DM: I don’t remember any conversations about Black Mountain with Aaron myself. Aaron had to get away from Chicago. He had a tough personal life. He had one final, relatively successful marriage, but the first marriage – before it was even consummated, she was institutionalized. I think they were all of 19 or 20. He supported her, paid for her institution, for the rest of her life. The second marriage was almost as bad. Aaron and his second wife had a daughter, Isabelle, but then his wife had a stroke and was relatively incapacitated. So he liked taking these road trips. He taught me about road trips. Because if you are working in this world, it’s your “duty,” that it’s found and not made. It’s a busy, chaotic place, the outside world. So it’s extremely difficult to formalize your ideas. It’s a major distraction to try to see through [the chaos]. How do you do it? It’s this picture, here, but what’s six inches to that side? Why isn’t *that* the picture? Why is it vertical and not horizontal? I work the same way. You have to stare it down and go into this meditative world that artists find when they are quietly ensconced in their

private studio. We're in a *public* studio when we do street photography. This is street photography.

JB: Was there any writer or philosopher who influenced him, who helped him to make the shift from documentary photographs to abstraction?

DM: He had a wonderful collection of the essential writers. He was a romantic. He loved Rilke, and he had some original *Duino Elegies*. A lot of his books were poetry books. Poetry was essential to Aaron.

JB: Tell us about the shift from when Aaron was doing all the printing of his work to when he brought you in as his first printer.

DM: Aaron was 74 when I started printing for him. That should say a lot—he printed until he was 74. He would go in there on his own. I printed a portfolio for him; that was my big project. The portfolio was a collection that his gallery put together with Aaron of what they decided were some of his most iconic images. The thing that distinguished *this* portfolio was that they were going to retire the negatives, so they wouldn't be printed again. Aaron was not excited about that. Gallerists try to control outcomes, and it affected him the rest of his career. A lot of these prints are signed in black ink on the front. He didn't do that willingly; older prints he signed on the back. But Light Gallery wanted their prints signed on the front, so that it was more visible. He didn't like that, but that was the gallerist's choice, and he was along for the ride. On a [beautiful spring] day, how many people would willingly go to a 10 x 14 foot dark room, with only a red safelight so you can barely see, full of chemical smells, for eight hours, six days a week? Aaron would.

JB: Given the conditions of his life, difficulties with his first wife, supporting her—perhaps the being on the road trips were a solution.

DM: Or in a darkroom. Do not disturb. You can't come in there. No one would want to spend hour after hour, six days a week...But he did that, and he didn't even have running water; he would have to carry the trays out, till he had his first darkroom in Rhode Island, when he was maybe 60. None of these abstract expressionists started to make lives for themselves until they were in their 50s.

JB: Despite the hardship in his life, he always had a twinkle in his eye and a great laugh. To me, he was very self-deprecating. I was 22 and this was arguably the first art friendship I had. When he came into the gallery, I completely flipped over him. He said "Come on over to the studio." When I met you [Denny] he would say to me, "Denny is a better printer than me. His black is blacker, his white is whiter. I'm sloppy."

DM: That's good to hear. Most photographers come from a place of control. I do not. I don't keep any records. I can't stand the control. That is the thing I rebelled against as an artist in photography, this idea that you're supposed to repeat print after print. We'd get the negative and go through the box and look for a print that he liked. And that

could be anything from a vintage print to something he printed ten or twenty years later. He'd go through them and he pick out a few. Then I'd take them to the darkroom and try to recreate them. But that fell apart quickly, because Aaron was an emotional printer. If a print was picked out before he left for lunch, and it was a bad lunch, he rejected that print. If he had a good lunch, it was: "That's a great print." He just looked at them and decided on the spot.

JB: Did he care more about critical response or sales of his work during his lifetime?

DM: Critical response, for sure. He came of age during socialism in 1930s New York. He never joined a communist party, but he majorly embraced that sensibility. There was this idea that even the art you make is made for the world. Forget about any idea of selling art. That is where his documentary foundation comes from. There was only documentary photography in the 30s when he began. He was already 40 years old when he picked up a camera. He'd come from teaching high school. He did brilliant work in New York, making brilliant records of that period. He did a lot of portraits. Aaron believed that documentary photography was a social responsibility, and this belief didn't leave when he shifted to expressionism. He loved giving away pictures. He gave a lot of women photographs. [Laughs] He loved the idea that people wanted a picture that he made. In documentary photos, he felt that reality was not in the *pictures* but in the *subject*, something that existed only in our minds and feelings. Something really dramatic had to happen to make him give up helping the world by documenting these social conditions.

JB: For someone like Aaron, with his socialist tendencies, to conform to the market is a really tough idea. Photography wants to be the democratic medium – think of the iPhone. De Kooning said one of Aaron's photos initiated the Women series, which is pretty heady stuff. Aaron had the ability to inspire other artists.

DM: Very much so. Their conversations were legendary, whenever they got together at the tavern or wherever. They had to develop a language. And Aaron was an articulate participant; he held his own there. They were developing a language of how to act as expressionists....

If you are a documentary photographer, you don't alter the subject, you don't mess with the truth. There is a story about Aaron when he was at the height of his solitary career; he was photographing a wall that was the most perfect composition for him. Except there was one leaf hanging in his composition. So he takes off his black cloth, snaps off the leaf, and looks around to make sure no one saw him.

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DM: He lived in an animated world – which is what kept him going. It wasn't an intellectual composition.

JB: When you were printing for him, was he in the darkroom with you?

DM: He came in there to see what I was doing. He would pick up a print and ruin it. [Laughs] He'd say, "That looks good," or, "You need a little more contrast...." He really wanted to stay active down there. But he was seventy-four years old, and, remember, he was not a technical man.

JB: What was the end of his life like?

DM: The same. He was just wonderful all the way through. He continued to take road trips with friends.