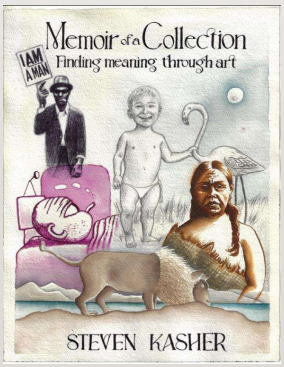
Hello dear friends. Thank you for coming out this evening or joining us on Zoom.

I'm honored and privileged to be on a panel with such photographic luminaries and to be invited by this august Institute.

So, we are considering questions such as What is photography? What is art? What do these things mean to us today? I'll be looking at these questions through the lens of my personal collection. Photographs and other artworks I have chosen to live with. Some go back to my childhood. Others came to me when I was an artist, a photographer, a photography dealer, a writer.

With the pandemic I found time to think about what I have and why I have it. In the end, I wrote a book. Its coming out this Spring from Abbeville Press.

MEMOIR OF A COLLECTION: FINDING MEANING THROUGH ART



Here is the cover. The book is a sequence of illustrated essays about works of art that have changed my life. With five or six images from the book, Sophie Crumb has captured its tone beautifully.

The title is *Memoir of a Collection: Finding Meaning through Art*. “Memoir of a Collection” points to how I —how we all— can use art to remember essential things, to recollect essential things. A collection is a magnet for meanings.

The magnetic field is wide, encompassing our personal histories, art histories and histories in general.

The book is 25 essays, or stories, or memoirs. I like to call them fables because they have a moral content. They are written from the perspective of a spiritual path. I've been exploring this path since high school but much more intensively in the last dozen or so years.

Some years ago, I was sitting in my office in my gallery. I suddenly realized that the artworks I had brought into my life, put up on my walls, cherished—they tell

the same story. Each of these pictures portrays human struggle AND overcoming. In every face, in everybody in these pictures you can see suffering, and you can see healing.

Of course, these pictures were made with a variety of intentions, but what I attune to is a message of struggle transcended—through courage, through human solidarity, through wisdom, through joy. I collect these images for myself, and as a gallerist, a publisher, a writer I set out to share these images and these messages.

I'll share three of these stories with you now.

One of the stories is called “Reaching for the Red Star Sky.” It begins with this gorgeous photograph by Nat Tileston. It shows my very first girlfriend dancing in the Trisha Brown company. The picture is of Brown's “Spanish Dance,” which was set to Bob Dylan singing “In the Early Morning Rain.”

Lisa Krause is the dancer in front. The dancers are piled-up, taking little steps in unison, reaching for the sky. Lisa introduced me to Zen Buddhism and to the work of John Cage.

Cage introduced me Zen Macrobiotics, the diet and philosophy that is about balancing the yin and yang of foods and of life. There was a cookbook that became my bible, *Zen Macrobiotic Cooking*. Here’s a quote: “You yearn for an apple with a worm in it—the trademark of a fruit free of chemicals. You learn to direct all your shopping impulse to the tired limp vegetables on their way to the refuse bin.”

I ate up that lesson in the special value of the pre-capitalist and the neglected. That’s still how I choose vegetables. And it’s a big part of how I collect pictures.

FOUND PHOTO

Here's the first photograph I collected. It dates back to my Macrobiotic days.

I saw it on an Avenue C sidewalk and picked it up. It is a battered and stained 8x10 discarded from someone's darkroom.

A narrow-wasted man performing for the camera. In front of a ghostly tree. A leaping nerd, a nerd in flight.

Outstretched fingers, fore and aft, signifying something. This refused picture spoke to me. It could be revived.

Cage's friend Marcel Duchamp was on my mind, inventor of the Readymade, the alchemy of turning not-art into art.

By cherishing this picture, by picking it up and calling it art, I was creating a Readymade. I was leaping into a dimension where noticing and making were one.

Here is the third image from this story about dancing, leaping, ascending. It's a self-portrait by Denise Dixon collaborating with Wendy Ewald. Dixon put herself in motion —a windmill of limbs. Her ecstatic gesture is echoed by the crisscross hills, by the pattern of the cinderblock wall, by the canted horizon.

An unwanted plank points at her feet. She is rooted AND floating, grounded AND groundless. This image links back to prehistoric cave paintings, to Dionysiac dancers on Greek vases, to Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, to Matisse's *Jazz* suite. Images of private and communal trance.

Dixon titled her work *Self Portrait Reaching for the Red Star Sky.* She turned on a transistor radio, started dancing, told a friend when to take the picture. Snapped at the exact moment, with its unheard music and its calm ecstasy, it makes me think of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's verse "A Poem for Inviting the Bell":

With body, speech, and mind in perfect oneness, I send my heart out with the sound of this bell.

May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness and transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

I am a dancer. I hope you are too. There is nothing more fun, or better exercise. I dance at least twice a week with a group called 5Rythyms.

When we dance, we send ourselves out to the music with body, expression, and mind in perfect oneness.

We let the music tighten us and release us, lift us up and put us down.

We dance UPON and ABOVE the dust and gravel and cinderblocks and random planks of our daily ground.

AYUMI FURUTA, AKA A-CHAN

Another story is about road pictures. This picture is by Ayumi Furuta, aka A-CHAN.

Ayumi and I met at the Steidl publishing house in Germany. We were making books there at the same time. Ayumi worked as a printer and assistant for Robert Frank. I mounted two exhibitions of A-CHAN's photographs in my gallery.

For the press release I interviewed her. I asked: "What is photography for you?" She replied: "For me it is more like things in a refrigerator next to scallion. But also a key to accept myself or to be a better person or something like that."

I'll read that again, because I love it: "What is photography?" "For me it is more like things in a refrigerator next to scallion. But also a key to accept myself or to be a better person or something like that."

I bought this picture from Ayumi. I saw a hot, still day, reeds, a narrow road, nothing more. I saw it as a cleansed vision, as in the Zen fable about
Enlightenment: "I see mountains once again as mountains, and rivers once again as rivers."

I would pass the picture hanging on my wall and wonder about why I liked it so much.

Eventually I looked more carefully and I saw more.

The reeds seemed familiar, and the narrow road, and the telephone poles. They reminded me of Fire Island, where I spent my summers as a kid. Many of you know that Fire Island is thin barrier island running parallel to Long Island. No cars. Just narrow walkways and sand. Our summer vacations were three months going barefoot.

The wind-blown reeds in A-CHAN's picture reminded me of classical Asian paintings of flying dragon clouds —ghostly representations of nature's disruptive powers. I had been struck by them in illustrated children's books.

DETAIL

Then I noticed an abandoned sneaker. Off at the bottom right, hidden in a dark rupture in all that brightness, hidden in an island of shadow.

Now the tranquil picture is disquieted. It is disturbed by a mystery. What casts that shadow? Is it a bicycle? Whose bicycle? From whose foot has the shoe fallen? What calamity or crime is afoot? Kind of *Blue Velvet*, if you know what I mean.

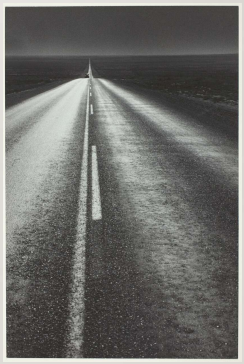
You'll notice it's a Nike sneaker with the swoosh logo. Does it matter to us here that Nike was Goddess of Victory, that the swoosh is an abstraction of her transcendent wings? Is this little Nike off at the edge actually the central point of the whole picture, the axis around which our readings should revolve?

Or are the shoe and the swoosh just scallions in the picture, just spicy garnishes to the main dish of the road and the reeds?

Maybe the lost shoe and victorious swoosh are keys to help us accept ourselves, to be better people, or something like that.

A-CHAN portrays a road which flows up from the base of her picture, from the bottom edge, the edge nearest to our perspective.

ROBERT FRANK



She does this in a tradition of road photographs. Here are two iconic ones by her mentor, Robert Frank, two empty roads leading to nowhere and everywhere.

ROBERT FENTON

Another famous example is Robert Fenton's *Valley of the Shadow of Death, 1855*.

It is a stark depiction of an earthen road littered with cannonballs, each bearing a message of death.

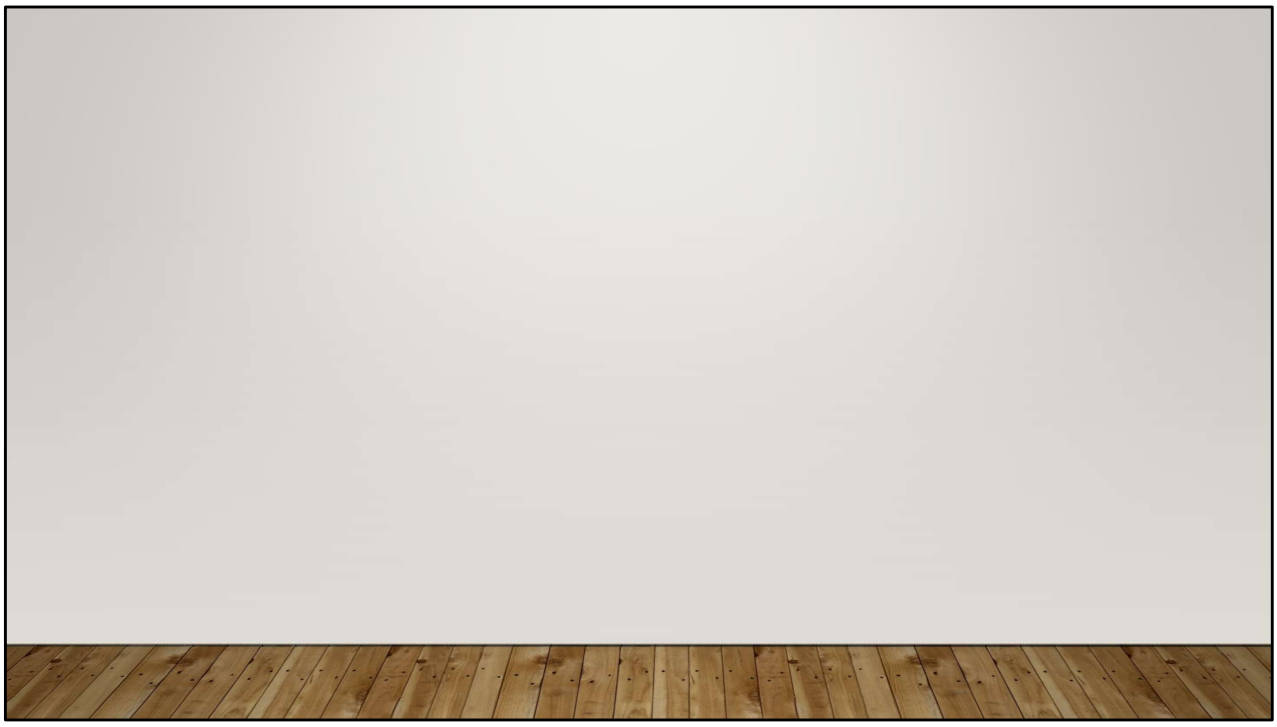
In road pictures like these, the path ends where the picture ends—at the horizon, at the edge beyond which we cannot see. Road pictures are shadowed by the end of the road, by the end of vision, by a vision of death.

JOURNEY

In road pictures such as these, the photographer invites us to start at the bottom and travel a road. She/he offers us a journey.

Using light and shadow, she/he reveals the textures of the road underfoot, invites us to feel the road, feel it as if walking it with shoes off. She/he invites us to give full attention to what we feel.

What we feel before we are cut off. I am reminded of the Buddha's deathbed words: "Things fall apart. Be mindful of the path."



Photographer Charles Moore made several of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement on a single day, May 3rd, 1963.

They show the “water hoses and police dogs” of racist oppression.

They have been referenced thousands s times since, reproduced in countless publications.

Andy Warhol’s silkscreens of these photographs are in museums worldwide.

They have become iconic images because they embody a specific time and place and at the same time TRANSCEND those moments. They rise up to depict a bigger perspective.

CHARLES MOORE

In 1963, *Life* magazine reached more Americans than any TV show. It reached half the adult population of the United States. *Life* showcased Moore's Birmingham images in their featured story of the week, an eleven-page article. This is the first spread, a wingspread of full fourteen inches, unmissable. **"They Fight a Fire That Won't Go Out."**

The picture is packed with signs of mid-century America. The block-letters on the fireman's jacket, the faux-stucco wall, the chrome fenders of the sedans, the casual-wear of the protestors, the streamlined helmets not unlike those worn by

Nazi stormtroopers. The picture also evokes combat more ancient: jousting from a medieval tapestry or a battlefield scene from the Bhagavad Gita, the war-narrative that Gandhi called his "spiritual dictionary." You see here protestors sitting on the sidewalk. Lined up in formation. Their hands protecting their heads. They had trained for this moment, trained to withstand all that authority could mete out.

They trained in the ways of the Peace Army, the nonviolent army organized by Gandhi. Following Gandhi, the Reverends Bevel, Lawson, Shuttlesworth, and King Junior organized a Peace Army in Birmingham. They trained it to confront violence with militant nonviolence. They trained it to fight by not fighting back.

CHARLES MOORE

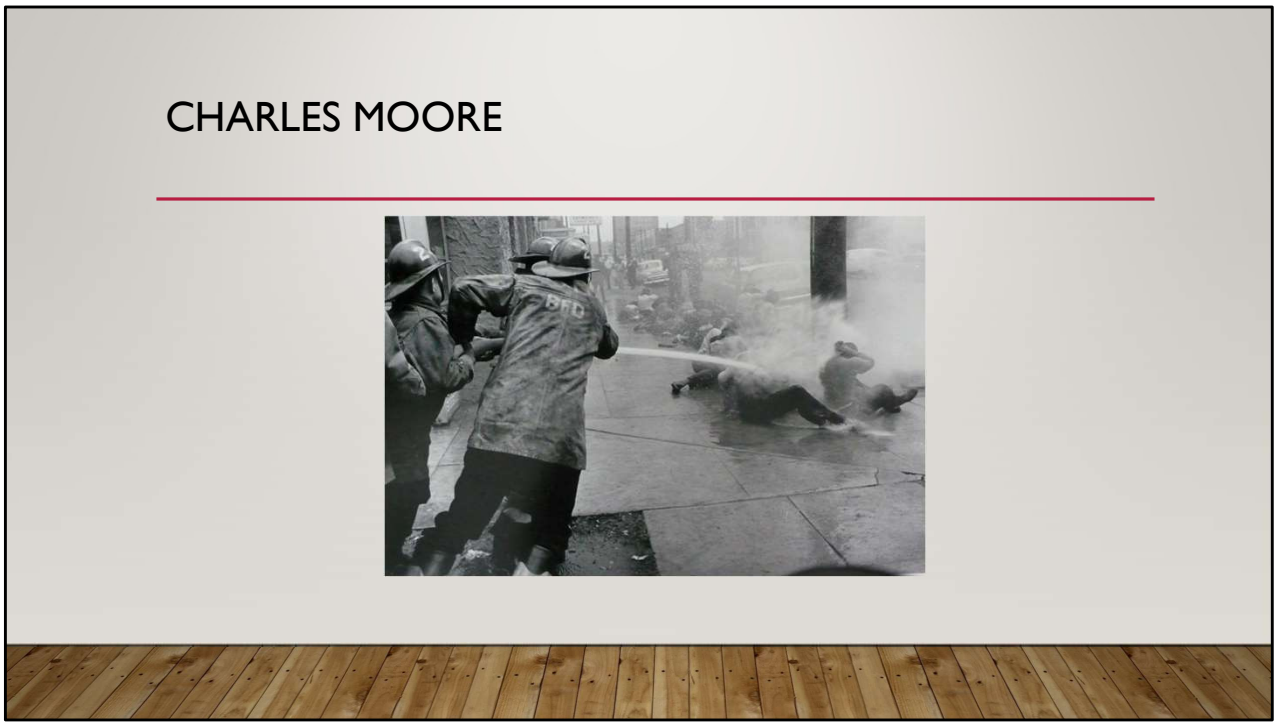
Charles Moore had trained for his moment too. Charles was from small-town Alabama, son of a white Baptist preacher.

He worked his way up to chief photographer for Alabama's leading daily newspapers.

These newspapers were far from antiracist. In 1958 Moore recorded an arrest of Rev. King. He followed King, snapping pictures, as King was arm-twisted into the police station and shoved against the booking desk. Moore jumped behind the booking sergeant to photograph from the viewpoint of power.

He implicated himself and us, the other viewers, in the aggression. King's gentle eyes and pursed mouth appeal to the booking sergeant, and to us. When this extraordinary photograph was published in Life, it launched Moore's national career.

And it taught him how to make a picture that speaks to the entire nation and that is morally expansive.



Moore's Birmingham pictures were made seven years later.

The firehose we see here has been fitted with a special high-pressure water-cannon designed to inflict pain and terror. Moore again positioned himself, and us, on the side of the oppressors. We lift the water-cannon up, we aim at the human target, we make the liquid-lance shatter against unsurrendering Black bodies, pummeling them down the sidewalk.

By this fierce image they are tumbled into history.

If the militant resisters are soldiers in a Peace Army, then who are the attackers under the insignia BFD? The Birmingham Fire Department trained its servicemen to fight fires for the benefit of their fellow citizens.

But here we see a horrible inversion. Their fellows have become a fire to extinguish. In what world could the protectors of the citizenry be twisted into attacking their fellow citizens? How could these civil servants have become enforcers of such a dehumanizing law? We know the answer. This is the realm and the logic of racism.

We see two faceless armies clashing across a grey void. They are connected by an arc

of water. The arc connects oppressed and oppressor, right and wrong, justice and injustice. It is the arc of the moral universe.

CHARLES MOORE

Martin Luther King famously proclaimed that this arc of the moral universe bends towards justice.

If it does, it must bend into a circle of community. A circle of common humanity. Or the fire won't go out.