

feature shoot

WORDS & PICTURES COLLIDE IN TEJU COLE'S NEW BOOK

By Miss Rosen, August 7, 2017



The relationship between image and text is one of the most challenging pairings to exist. They demand complete attention and so one must choose: to look or to read—and in what order?

Perhaps it seems deceptively simple: one simply does as they are inclined. Yet regardless of preference, they inform each other, infinitely. When we read, we see the picture in our mind. When we look, we write the words ourselves. Now we are asked to forgo our imagination and focus on the given context.

Yet few can bridge the gap that exists between the linguistic and visual realms, the distinctive forms of intelligence that operate independently and interdependently at the same time. Most often, we simply opt out somewhere along the line, wanting to return to the freedom to imagine for ourselves rather than listen to what we are told.

Writer Teju Cole understands this well. As photography critic for the New York Times Magazine, Cole has mastered the painting pictures with words that illuminate and elucidate in equal part so that his words both add and peel back layers from that which appears before our eyes. As an author of *Open City* (2011) and *Every Day is for the Thief* (2014), Cole crafts entire worlds inside the written world, evoking the very experience of life itself.

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Now, in his first solo show, Teju Cole: Blind Spot and Black Paper at Steven Kasher Gallery, New York, on view through August 11, 2017, the writer brings us along for a journey around the world, looking at life in Capri, Zurich, Lagos, Saint Moritz, Chicago, Nairobi, Brooklyn, Seoul, and more, where we see life not only through his eyes but experience it through his prose.

The exhibition, which accompanies the publication of his fourth book, *Blind Spot* (Random House), features a selection of 30 color photographs accompanied by a single paragraph. Each piece of text is a beautifully encapsulated prose poem that draws us into uncharted depths, giving voice to the image that quietly beckons us with its simple, subtle lyricism of color, shape, and form.

“A length, a loop, a line. Faraway wave seen from the deck of the ship. I think the Annunciation must have happened on a day like this one. Stillness. In the interior, she reads with lowered eyes, unaware of what comes next. A presence made of absence, the crossbar, the cloth, the wound in his side,” Cole writes in dense, intense, luminous prose that accompanies a very tight frame of a curtain hanging from its frame, with just a sliver of the velvety blue sky of Zurich peaking through.

Here it is that life occurs, the setting where existence unfolds as thought, action, word. Cole’s words act as a voiceover, setting the scene... Or is it his photographs that illustrate the space in which these events occur? It need not be either/or but a new paradigm: both, at the same time, in an endless cycle of back and forth, just as occurs every moment we are present and aware of the fact that we are both act on the environment as the environment acts upon us. In this way Cole’s photographs come alive, creating a new level of possibility that exists within the interconnection between that which we think and that which we see.

It is the gift of sight that Cole celebrates, for one morning in 2011 he awoke blind in one eye. The cause was papillophlebitis, perforations to the retina that made it impossible for him to perceive depth so that not only was he unable to see, but he had trouble walking.

As one who had always taken to the street, able to move among the people, sharing their world and their experiences through his prose, Cole’s illness struck him on several levels at the same time. “The photography changed after that,” Siri Hustvedt writes in the book. “The looking changed.”

Blind Spot is the result. In these works, Cole moves through the landscape and the cityscape without making a sound, seeing life as it unfolds as a something we pass through, rarely taking note of the setting of our lives—the veritable context in which existence takes place. So often we skate across the surface of things, seeing, but never looking, at the nuance and complexity.

In this way, Cole’s words make us pause and reflect, not simply on what lies before our eyes but the ways in which context acts upon our perception of self. The photograph acts as a memory, freezing time forever more, so that we can move in between our inner and outer lives, considering that ways in which the mirror each other infinitely, able to see beneath the surface of a thousand dreams.