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Dr. Burns' Visual Vigilance

DR. STANLEY BURNS is an ophthalmologist who lives and works in a big townhouse on E. 38th St. He's also a world-renowned collector of historical photographs. When I last visited him, back in the summer of 1991, these photos—roughly *half a million* of them then—were literally all over the house. Stacked on the floors, piled on every available piece of furniture, spilling out of

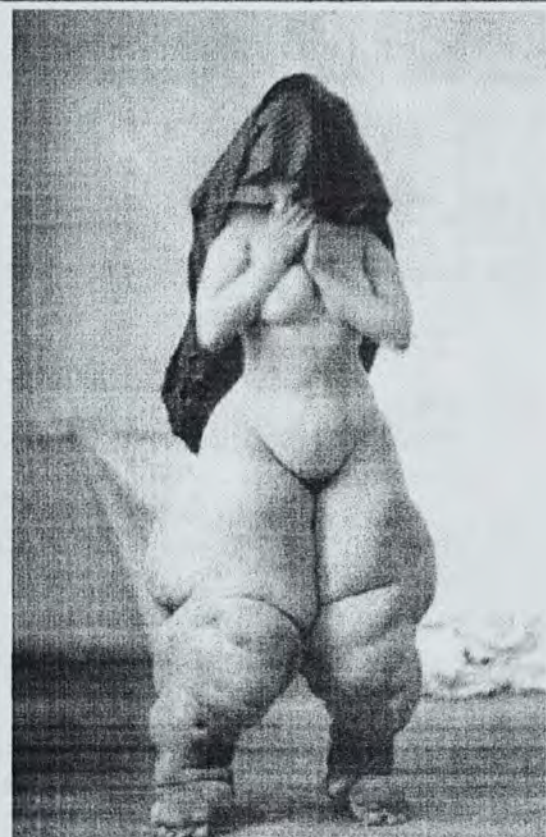
closets, making it difficult to use the stairs or the bathrooms. It looked like a hurricane had sucked up every photograph ever taken in the history of the world and dumped them all down his chimney.

He's added maybe another 200,000 photos since then, and they're still all over the place, but with the help of his wife Sara and his daughter Elizabeth, who has become his full-time collaborator, he's gotten much more organized. The walls of the basement and first floor are still covered with photos; there are file cabinets full of them crammed into every available space. Shelves of the books he uses for research are everywhere as well. But at least it's all segregated by category and topic now. There's some sense of order to the overflow.

Stanley Burns keeps ferociously busy. A highly respected, non-academic historian of photography, he has authored or coauthored a dozen major books in about as many years—he routinely has six or seven books in the works at once—and written numerous articles and papers. He gives lectures and seminars all over the place. In the past year alone he has curated or contributed to a dozen museum and gallery exhibits, from the Musee D'Orsay in Paris to the Metropolitan to the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Other historians and curators are constantly hitting up the Burns Archive (www.burnsarchive.com), as his collection is known, for source materials. So is Hollywood. In *The Others*, when Nicole Kidman finds the old photos of dead people? Burns provided them. His photos put him in the center of a controversy about Picasso and the development of modern art. He is just now opening the Burns Gallery, a private photo gallery in a front room of the townhouse. And he maintains his private medical practice. He is in perpetual motion. He speaks quickly and roams restlessly among his rooms, his attention caroming from one project to the next. When I ask him if he ever sleeps, he gives me a look and says, "No. You know that."

But he's not just keeping himself inhumanly occupied. The average Stanley Burns project is a thing of strange beauty, always thought-provoking and eye-opening, often startling, usually a revelation of some kind.

Two of his earliest books remain triumphs of the instructively shocking: the sometimes gruesome *Masterpieces of Medical Photography*, coauthored with Joel-Peter Witkin, and *Sleeping Beauty*, his best-known, based on his huge collection of 19th-century post-



From "Animated Life: Medical Photography From The Burns Archive, New York", Turbro 2002 Art Biennial, Neon Gallery Brösarp, Sweden, September 14-December 15, 2002.



From *Sleeping Beauty II* and "Le Dernier Portrait", Musée d'Orsay, Paris March 4-May 26, 2002.

Collecting history, not heritage.

mortem and memorial photos. The latter, with its antique portraits of dead babies and grieving parents that, nicely framed, were hung in Victorian parlors as mementos mori, presented a sadly eloquent argument for how much our view and experience of death shifted in the 20th century.

"I realized that there is a great void in our culture in dealing with topics of death," Burns explains. "We live in a youth-oriented culture that does not deal with the realities of life. We want a big house, a big car, a big girlfriend or boyfriend. We avoid all the unpleasantness of life until the end of life."

We can do that, he says, because of advances in medicine and the concomitant "decline of the place of the physician in society... We can live to be old and not have to deal with death... We removed death from everyday life." In the 19th century death, doctors and deceased relatives and children were a much more constant presence. The parlors of our homes were the original "funeral parlors." Death dropped by often.

Earlier this year, when Burns contributed a cache of *Sleeping Beauty* photos to "a spectacular exhibit" on post-mortem



From "A Dream Deferred: The African-American Experience 1848-1928", Inaugural Exhibition, Center For The Study of Life In The United States, Haifa, Israel, November 14, 2002-February 14, 2003.

and memorial imagery—photos, paintings, sculptures—at the Musée D'Orsay, the museum asked him for copies of the book to sell. Originally published in 1990, *Sleeping Beauty* had long since gone out of print. Burns and his daughter, as the Burns Archive Press, quickly produced a revised and updated *Sleeping Beauty II*, in a French-English limited edition of 5000 copies. It's available through his website, at \$75. Like the original, it's a thing of morbid beauty and fascination.

The WTC massacre happened as the Burnses were working on *Sleeping Beauty II*, so he quickly added material on the way WTC-related photos were being used last fall for "communal grieving." His focus was those snapshot-bearing fliers of WTC missing persons that loved ones pasted all over various sections of New York City in the weeks after 9/11. In the original *Sleeping Beauty*, the most one could say was that there'd been a tiny resurgence of post-mortem photography in the country. But here suddenly were great numbers of people displaying photos of deceased loved ones as a public act of bereavement. (Like me, Burns got the sense very early on that few people thought their loved ones were "missing.") Very much like 19th-century families, WTC victims' families used photographs to keep the deceased's memory alive.

"Remember," Burns says of the 19th-century photos, "those pictures hung in the parlor. So people could come and say, 'Here's Fred, here's Tom.' They're still members of the family. The photograph allows them to remain members of the family." Similarly, the WTC victim in one of those fliers wasn't just a name and number: he had a face.

Burns' books become collectors' items in themselves. *Sleeping Beauty* and *Masterpieces of Medical Photography* have enjoyed lively after-markets where copies sell for up to \$700. *Sleeping Beauty*, he reports proudly, "has been stolen from most libraries." When Burns had an exhibit of his own photographs (characteristically, he's an avid, autodidactic photographer, and a damn good one) at the National Arts Club last December, a display copy of *Sleeping Beauty* was ripped off. At the National Arts Club. Some arty toff just had to have it. He thinks the appeal is because death is the last taboo. One librarian told him that "it's worse than a sex book. You can go to the street corner and buy books about sex now, but you can't buy books about death."

Dr. Burns will sign copies of *Sleeping Beauty II* on Oct. 10, 6-8 p.m., at Ursus Books, 132 W. 21st St. (betw. 6th & 7th Aves.), 627-5370.

WHILE BURNS is the world's best-known collector of early medical photography, with more than 50,000 images, the Burns Archive stretches to many other categories. He lists the other major ones for me: ethnology, crime, African-Americans, Asians, Native Americans, daguerreotypes and other similar "hard images," fashion and theater, and war. ("I can supply pictures of most wars, whether it's the Balkan War of 1911 or the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 or the Zulu War of 1879." He's putting together a book on one of his "favorite" wars, the Mexican Revolution. "I have the private photograph album of Pancho Villa's doctor.")

"We can put together important exhibitions in any of these fields in a short amount of time," he declares, "with iconic pictures that have not been seen."

That "not been seen" is critical to Burns. He professes bewilderment that so much history of photography is taught with such a limited palette of well-known images, when there's such a galaxy of other photos out

there to be seen. He puts it succinctly: "How many Walker Evanses do I need to see?... Every photography book that comes out has the same old pictures. I want to show you what you *haven't* seen on a specific topic."

He rebels against the way that limiting of the images that get shown and discussed presents a highly edited view of history. He speaks of "visual vigilance." "We think in pictures... Usually we think best and remember things best as visual images." New images on a topic promote new thinking about it, he argues. "I collect history, not heritage... Heritage is the day-dream of history. It's the parts you want to remember. History is the whole story. History is John Kennedy inviting women to the White House. Heritage is a hind-sight philosophy. For instance, one of the things I write about in medicine is that there is no Darwinian progression in any history. In medicine, new ideas come out of leftfield, from people who aren't even doctors. The x-ray, or radium, or anesthesia, which came from a dentist. There is no unbroken line. People *make up* an unbroken line of things they *choose* from the past. The books that I write, and the pictures that I show, are not the 'achievements,' but the reality—or as much as is left, photographically."

For instance, his African-American collection focuses not on well-known slave imagery, but on "the hardworking African-American middle class—the people who have made something of themselves in spite of the system, the emerging African-American middle class—of the 19th century. We're talking 1860s, 70s, 80s, 90s. Not 1940, '50, '60. And this is the first time there were exhibitions on that material." Through Oct. 20, the Bronx Museum of the Arts is displaying photos from this collection. This fall, a museum in Haifa will host a similar exhibit, with Fulbright sponsorship. Burns has organized but not yet found a publisher for the book he wants to do on this topic, *The Dream Deferred*.

With his working-class Brooklyn background (his dad was a union organizer, his mom a chocolate-dipper), Burns also favors vernacular history. His 1995 *Forgotten Marriage: The Painted Tintype & the Decorative Frame 1860-1910* documents the spread and democratization of painted portraits. With early photographic methods—tintypes, daguerreotypes, solar prints, etc.—it was suddenly possible for everybody, not just rich folks, to have a portrait taken. But these early photographic images were often small, dark and, of course, monotone. Yet when the photo was painted over and placed in a fancy if inexpensive frame, it looked a lot classier and more like rich folks' traditional oil portraits. It was an ingenious—if sometimes clumsily executed—adaptation of a high art form for the masses, and Burns' is the first book solely devoted to it.

As usual, Burns and Elizabeth are now working on some half-dozen books at the same time; which ones get into print first, he says, reflects market demand or opportunity. One they have ready to go is based on an exhibit Elizabeth organized for the National Arts Club. It's on Lewis Hine, the turn-of-the-20th-century photographer best known for his tear-jerking portraits of poor immigrants at Ellis Island and dirty-faced urchins forced into child labor. Typically, the Burnses' book, provisionally titled *Children at Play*, tells a different story, revealing Hines' forgotten shots of those same kids happily romping in playgrounds and schoolyards. Also typically, the book has a medical-history aspect: it's about the early 20th-century movement to get kids out of the slums

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and workshops and into fresh air as an anti-TB measure.

Then there's *Through Nazi Eyes*, based on his absolutely startling collection of scrapbooks and snapshots taken by German soldiers. It's a footsoldier's view of the war, and a horribly incriminating one, showing Privates Hans and Dieter horsing around in a lake in one snapshot, then looking just as happy as they round up Jews for extermination in the next. Daniel Goldhagen would have a field day with this material.

They're working on a book of crime photography. Here's J. Edgar Hoover and his companion butchering it up in front of Bonnie and Clyde's bullet-riddled car; here an early experiment in the police lineup, when they didn't have two-way mirrors—instead, the witnesses, standing right in front of the lined-up criminals, wore masks.

There's another book of medical photography he calls *Sea Surgeons*, based on his collection of the original photos documenting the activities of the USS *Solace*, the only hospital ship operating in the Pacific at the start of World War II. He's got a particular interest, having done air/sea rescue work during his time in the Coast Guard in the mid-60s. And *Blue, Gray and Red*, based on his collection of Civil War medical photos. And *Strange Fruit*, a book about lynchings.

May they all see print.

Meanwhile, the Burns Gallery will be open by appointment in a few weeks. He's not selling off his collection, just doubles and multiples in a variety of genres. Images crowding the walls of the tiny front room include an Edward Weston study, a portrait of a 19th-century Japanese lady, a young John Glenn, a David Hamilton nude, a 1930s fashion shot and a very early panorama of Egyptian ruins. Depending on rarity, these photos may fetch anywhere from some few hundred dollars to some tens of thousands.

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