

A Conversation with John Upton: A Life in Photography by Richard Whittaker

John Upton grew up in the San Fernando Valley just north of Los Angeles. His father was a newspaper publisher and his mother ran a small advertising agency. Because of their work, Upton met many photographers. While still a senior in high school an unexpected encounter with a portfolio of Edward Weston's original prints brought his interest in photography into clear focus. He soon moved to San Francisco to enroll in what is now the San Francisco Art Institute. The year was 1951. I first heard about Upton from Anne Veh who told me he had been a student of Minor White's. She also described *The Golden Decade—1945-55*, a book that Upton is featured in along with several other students of the first fine art photography department. It was at the California School of Fine Arts [now SFAI] and was founded by Ansel Adams. He brought Minor White in to run it leaving him with more time for his own photography. Upton's encounter with Minor White, first as a student and later as a friend, formed a life-long influence and inspiration that led to his own multi-faceted career in photography. Hearing this from Anne, I wanted to meet Upton and we soon arranged an interview. I knew that Edward Weston's work had made a big impact on him, and I wanted to learn more about that.

Richard Whittaker: And you were a senior in high school at that time?

John Upton: Yes. That would have been about 1950. I was eighteen. I saw the Weston prints and was just flabbergasted. They were so elegant! And somehow I think that was the key moment that helped me decide what I wanted to do with my life.

RW: Tell me about that. That must have been a surprise.

JU: It was. I just remember having the prints spread out in front of me.

RW: Can you say anything about what it was that made it click for you suddenly?

JU: I'd seen so many newspaper photographs and other photos that were made for specific purposes, commercial photos—but here I was seeing photographs that were art. I understood enough about contemporary art at the time to see the relationships to cubism and to modernist abstraction and so on. And there was something too about the fact that these were 8 x 10 contact prints with that smoothness in tonality. They were just so

elegant.

RW: We don't see those so much anymore.

JU: No. But Linda Conner still does them.

RW: So it wasn't too long after seeing that Weston portfolio that you went up to San Francisco, right?

JU: Right. I was wondering who I could work with. I knew Weston by then had Parkinson's disease. But I'd seen Ansel Adams' work and I liked it. So I just called him on the phone! He answered and I told him I was very interested in photography. I offered to be an unpaid apprentice. He said, "Well, I have an apprentice already." It was Pirkle Jones, by the way. But he said, "Come to San Francisco and talk with me." So I gathered a few of my prints together and my friend and I drove up to San Francisco.

I met him at a Mexican restaurant near his home and Pirkle was with him. We ate a little and chatted. You know, Ansel was very gregarious and could be very warm and outgoing. He was very good to me, and after dinner he invited me to come to his house. He said, "I want to introduce you to somebody." It was Minor White.

Minor was with some students, and I remember walking in. Everything was so quiet. They were looking at some prints. It was very different from Ansel who could be so outgoing. Suddenly it was quiet.

RW: That's interesting, to have that impression of the quiet...

JU: I didn't know what it meant, exactly.

RW: Can you remember that moment right now?

JU: Oh, yes. I remember what it looked like and felt like.

RW: So that's a pretty strong memory.

JU: It's a strong memory. But the conversation with Minor was not too encouraging. He said he would prefer that I had two years of college before I enrolled. I thought, well, we'll see about that. Because I had my mind made up about what I wanted to do.

I graduated at the end of the fall semester from Hollywood High School and I worked off and on through the Spring semester. I drove a truck. I worked for a photographic company that made filters. I even met Weegee while he was in Los Angeles. And I remembered what Minor had said, but I decided to circumvent that and enroll in the school, which I did.

RW: And that school is now the San Francisco Art Institute.

JU: Which was then called the California School of Fine Arts. Of course, Ansel founded the photography program there, but when I got there, he was only teaching on occasion. Minor was there. Imogene Cunningham taught part time. Dorothea Lange taught part time. The arrangement with Edward Weston was that we would go to his house during the spring, although I started going before then.

I arrived at the school with my bags and I knew I was facing a hurdle because of what Minor had said, that I needed two years of college. And when I was enrolling they said I had to go and talk with Minor White. I thought, oh boy, here it comes. But things were changing at the school. After the war, there were lots of students, but the time I arrived in 1951, the student population had dropped dramatically. Now they were looking for students. And first of all, I think Minor had forgotten who I was, but he said nothing about two years of college. He said, Okay, fine, and I was in.

RW: Now was Minor the head of the department?

JU: He ran it. When you see this book [The Golden Decade], it talks about Minor's roll in the school. It talks about Ansel's. It talks about everyone's roll. And just by happenstance, I ended up living next to Imogene Cunningham on Green Street.

RW: You landed in the middle of something pretty amazing!

JU: Yes. Minor said something about this much later in my life. He said that I always had the ability to be standing in the right place at the right time. And I did. It's only later that you look back and realize how extraordinary the series of events was. So I started the program. And Minor was the dominant figure.

RW: You mentioned that before the classes began you went down and visited with Edward Weston. I wanted to hear about that.

JU: I went two or three times. He had a little easel on a table where he'd show prints or he'd show you his darkroom, or he would just chat.

RW: In the article I read [Photographer's Forum, Winter 2010] it mentions how in meeting Weston, you became "enamored of the bohemian life."

JU: That's true. I was. That was because of his background.

RW: I wondered if you'd say what it was about the bohemian life that appealed to you. And what is the bohemian life?

JU: Right. What is it? But we'll have to look at this through the eyes of a 19 year-old. I'd grown up in the San Fernando Valley and at one point I'd gone to a very elegant private school, Harvard Military School, now Harvard Westlake. My friend was George Stevens, Jr. founder of the American Film Institute. His father was George Stevens, the director of many famous movies. Richard Zanuck was there, the son of Darryl Zanuck. These were people I hung out with, and I didn't like them.

I was rebelling against my own upper middle class existence at the time and then, when I got to San Francisco, I was on my own. There were great girls [laughs]. There was an acceptance of people and lifestyles that I had not seen where I grew up. That was exciting. I used to make all the bars in town and whatnot. Then there were all the artists I was meeting, and the conversations. There was a bar in North Beach called Vesuvio's where I used to hang out.

RW: Oh, I know the place. It's still there!

JU: This was all new for me. Here gay people were accepted and people of different ethnic backgrounds. Everybody was accepted in a way that they were not in the environment I

grew up in. I don't mean my family's environment. They were a lot more open. And I knew a lot about Weston's past from articles I'd read and things Minor had talked about in class—and I just admired that. I admired that he managed to survive practicing an art that paid almost nothing at the time.

I'll tell you a shock that came to me recently. When we went to his house as students, we could buy prints if we wanted to. They were \$25. I remember one print I looked at, an 8 x 10 nude; that print sold at Sotheby's about a year ago for 1.3 million. I think about that. It signals, in a very broad sense, what has happened in terms of accepting photography.

RW: That's an interesting subject in itself. Now you said you admired Weston because he had followed something in spite of the fact that there was very little money in it.

JU: And remember, with Weston, before he left his wife and went to Mexico, he had been a very successful commercial photographer. A lot of people forget that. He had a studio in Glendale and was very well known. But he gave all that up to follow this need to make the kind of photographs he wanted to, which he really began to shape while he was in Mexico. By the time I'd met him, he'd already had a big show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1946. Nancy and Beaumont Newhall and worked on that. But still, \$25... And he wasn't selling that much!

The very fact that he continued to work right up to the point where the Parkinson's stopped him, and continued to make the kind of photographs he wanted, to photograph anything he wanted, was, to me, something that was very impressive.

It also signaled that in my life that I would never be a businessman. I didn't know how to do that. I mean, I did. I actually made a little money doing commercial photography at one time in my life. But I didn't want to do it. And it was Minor who kept urging me to go into teaching, which I finally did.

RW: There was something intangible that fed Weston in his pursuit of photographing just what he wanted to photograph. Would you agree to that?

JU: Yes. There was a comment Edward made once to the effect that some women's clubs were his only audience. Upscale women would occasionally buy a print. In contrast to Europe, to Germany or France—where art is an important activity—here, it's not so. It was a hard road, but Edward followed it.

RW: Okay. Now I wanted to get back to your connecting with Minor White at the California School of Fine Arts and how that worked.

JU: Right. The longer I was there, the more I began to listen carefully to Minor. In those days he was not as great a teacher as he later became. He would develop his ideas very slowly in class because, in many cases, he'd only really come to some idea just the morning before and he was trying to give it shape as something that could be taught, something that we should be looking at and thinking about. And Minor, before he was a photographer, he was a poet. He was an interesting man. His first degree was in botany.

Later on Minor's interest in literature would help shape the direction I would take in photography. So I was listening to him, and he would give assignments. For instance, we would do documentary projects like photographing the essence of a place. How do you find the essence of a place? He was beginning to hint at what would later become teaching methods like being able to relax your body and relax your mind and to listen,

working in kind of a meditative state.

RW: Did you know where that came from?

JU: Oh, it was complicated. Yes, I do. It came from his investigations, his continual search for his own spiritual identity. But also, he took us along with him. A person can search for his spiritual identity and live on a mountain, I've seen this in Japan where a Zen master pulls back, but Minor didn't do that. Minor would try to bring us along so we were seeing what he was thinking about, and understanding what he was feeling. The making of a photograph is an important thing. He never used the word "shoot." You didn't "shoot" a photograph. You made a photograph.

RW: So when you say you began to listen more and more to him, was it because this aspect became more interesting to you?

JU: Yes. Again, I was nineteen and I was taking in everything. And watching the way he was trying to give shape to his own work became important to me. So I was there from September of 1951 to November in 1952. Then I got drafted in to the Korean War. That was a shock, especially because in September of 1952, I was given a scholarship. I was so delighted because my parents who had been doing well—long story—had gone into bankruptcy. My grandparents helped out a little, but I had no money, and I was so immersed in what I was doing.

So off I go to the Hanford atomic energy plant, which brings up another issue, which was exposure to radiation while I was there.

I was really disappointed that I had to leave the school. But being at Hanford Washington, I'd get passes from time to time and I'd come back to San Francisco and hang out with my friends and with Minor.

In 1953 Minor left the school and went to Rochester. He took a job at the George Eastman House. I came back and helped him pack his stuff. I even sold his Jeep for him. Then I was stuck. I was in the Army. There had been big changes at the school and I didn't want to go back there. Ansel had pulled back. Imogene had pulled back. Pirkle was still teaching there, but I wanted to study with Minor and didn't know what to do. Minor wrote to me and said, I've got an idea. Come to Rochester and be a resident student. Get a job. Help me type Aperture. The history of Aperture, by the way, is part of all this, too, because Aperture was founded while I was there at CSFA.

So I didn't get out of the Army until January of 1955. I went home to visit my parents for a week and then got on a train and went to Rochester. There was Minor waiting for me at the railway station. I stayed there for a year, and that was an absolutely remarkable time for me.

Minor was thinking and reading and following this exploration of his own spiritual life, and so we were reading things together like Daisetz Suzuki on Zen, books on Eastern religion, Eastern art, things that ended up shaping my life. We were looking at it, talking about it, and then I got to spend a lot of time with the Newhalls. I was kind of an unpaid intern at the Eastman House. I was getting the G.I. bill, but that wasn't enough to survive. I even worked as night clerk in a hotel. In your early twenties you think you can do everything. And I did! I typed for Aperture and then Minor and I talked continually. And we visited the Newhalls. That was important because Beaumont dropped something else into my life and that was a fascination with the history of photography.

RW: Now Anne suggested you thought the spiritual basis of Minor's work hadn't been give its due.

JU: It hasn't.

RW: Could you say something about that?

JU: This is a tough one. I've been trying to encourage some museum people to do a show of Minor's work with a new catalog. Now we're into sticky territory because you may be familiar with the show that Peter Bunnell did many years ago on Minor. The show traveled. It even came to the Oakland Museum and I was invited up to give a lecture about Minor at that point. Peter Bunnell was a student of Minor's at RIT while I was there also as a resident student of Minor's. Minor taught classes at RIT. Talking about having the best students in the world! There was Peter Bunnell—who later had the endowed chair in the history of photography at Princeton—Bruce Davidson, Jerry Ulsmann, he was a student. These kids all came over on Friday evenings. We drank [laughs]. So I got to know them.

RW: And you were saying it was a sticky thing trying give the proper place to the spiritual underpinning of Minor's work.

JU: I felt that in the shows that have been done, it has been short-changed. I used to do a lecture on Minor; I did it half a dozen times maybe, and I did one at the Society for Photographic Education once in New York. Peter Bunnell came. And Peter had done the show on Minor already. I was surprised to see Peter there. He mentioned to me that he never understood Minor's involvement with the Gurdjieff movement. Well, I understood it completely. No one has really done a show where the catalog essays, or any essay, addresses this aspect of Minor.

There is one book you absolutely have to read. It's Minor's own book about himself *Mirrors, Messages and Manifestations*. In it, Minor talks about the spiritual quest. It's there! And somehow this just didn't get addressed in shows that have been done about him.

RW: My impression is that there's a bias against that sort of thing in the high art world.

JU: There is. And I'm glad you brought that up. I'm going to be negative here for a while. After I left Rochester in 1956 and moved back to LA and established my life there, I got to know lots of people working in photography. One of my closest friends was Robert Heinekin, who just died a short time ago. He was one of the most powerful figures in LA in the photography world.

RW: I know he was important in the photography department at UCLA.

JU: He became the chair of the department. Well, they were working in completely different worlds. One thing about Robert was he knew he was working in a different world, but he could still talk to me about what Minor did. But there was a critic who wrote some very negative things about Minor, kind of making it sound like he was some kind of guru wearing sandals and sitting in meditation and the students are supposed to do all this hippie stuff and so on. I'm overdoing it, but not by much. That negativity towards Minor was something that I had problems with.

RW: It didn't correspond to your experience.

JU: It didn't correspond to my experience. And if it was an attack on that aspect of Minor, the spiritual, it was an attack on me, too—because I was shaped by a lot of Minor's ideas. I mean, the T-shirt I'm wearing, can you read what it says? [no] If you translate it into Chinese, it's "Chan." In Japanese, it's "Zen." [laughs]

RW: So in the artworld you might not want it getting around that you're a spiritual type.

JU: Even though this was in the sixties and seventies, when a lot of people were more tolerant of these things. Ginsberg and Kerouac were interested in Zen. They went to Japan. In fact, the Zen temple I lived in at one time was where a lot of these people came to see what Zen was about.

RW: So you actually lived there in a Zen temple?

JU: In Los Angeles I worked with Sosaki Roshi when he first came to this country in the early 60s. I didn't go to Japan until 1970. Then I ended up being allowed to stay at Daitokoji and then at Shinjoan, which is one of the main Zen temples in this complex of 32 temples. Shinjoan was Eque's memorial temple.

RW: So I take it that you still have a Zen practice.

JU: Now it's just personal. But Sosaki Roshi is still teaching. He's 104. My first wife got involved with Zen some forty-odd years ago. We'd go there and drop out and come back in. And she is now staying in the temple where he is. He's telling her, I can't die until you're enlightened! [laughs]

RW: [laughs] Well, it's clear that you've had a real relationship with Zen.

JU: Yes. I did. Zen is still an important part of my life in terms of how I think about things and in terms of my own work. But I don't make it a point to talk about it anymore.

RW: You mentioned that you could understand Minor's involvement with the Gurdjieff movement. How far did that go back?

JU: That's a good question. But let me finish my part of the story at Rochester. I left in 1956. Then afterwards I would help Minor with workshops on occasion. We wrote. We kept in touch. So when did he start? I'm guessing it would have been about the early sixties.

RW: Well, going back to when you were first a student of his, one assignment was to go out to photograph the essence of a place. What were some of the other assignments?

JU: Some of them were more conventional. In portraiture it was about, again, understanding the essence or true nature of the person you were photographing. And when we went to Point Lobos, essence was part of it. It wasn't until Minor began doing workshops—and this was after I'd gone to Rochester—that he began shaping his ideas in a very different way. This is when he did the concentration exercises.

RW: What would those be?

JU: Okay. I eventually used this in my own teaching. This was about attempting to see a photograph in the greatest possible depth. He would have a group in a room and then he

would project an image, but you would have your eyes closed. You'd be sitting with your back straight and your hands in your lap. Then he'd suggest to relax, starting from your eyes and moving down to your face and on down through your body to your feet. Bring all your energy down. And this would take some time. You'd hear the sound of the slide projector. And after you'd sort of parked your energy on the floor for a while, then he'd say, okay, bring the energy back up through your body and let it settle it behind your eyes. Then again, time would go by and he'd say, okay, now open your eyes.

He would say, remember your first thought, the first thing you feel, the first thing that happens when you open your eyes and look at the image. Then, okay, put that aside and he would go through steps. How does this photograph affect you emotionally? And he didn't say anything during this. He just asked these questions. Then, how did it affect you physically? And then, how did it affect you intellectually? What thoughts did you have? And you were supposed to remember all this, including your first impression.

Then he'd turn the slide projector off and ask the students to write down what they'd experienced. Once in a while there would be someone who, "I'm not going to do this." But it was amazing! Because of the breadth and depth of things that people saw and shared.

He used certain of his own photographs for this. He used them over and over again, because then he would develop a whole body of responses.

So that was the opening stage. And the next stage was going out into the field and going through the same process. You had to choose a place where you could do this, of course. Not a busy city street.

I used the same exercises for a while with my own students. I'd take them down to the beach in a quiet place and then go through the whole thing. Then I'd say, now pick up your cameras and walk like you're walking on eggs and look, and see. And make a photograph of what you respond to.

It's a very different state. You're in a different state. I find that I still make my best images when I do that today.

RW: This is very different, but I'd imagine that many students, or at least some students, would find this quite wonderful.

JU: Oh, yes. Some did. But some saw it as a little too strange for their taste. I used these techniques for a few years and occasionally I still get an email from someone who says I remember us doing that and it meant so much. It was worth it.

It's something you do and then it begins to shape the way you see things. In other words, when you pick up the camera you go into this serious mode. And I'm still doing this in Hawaii. By the way, that technique came from Gestalt therapy, which was pretty big in the 60s.

RW: Fritz Perls?

JU: Very good. You get an "A"... [we both laugh]

RW: Yes. Nowadays most of us live in our heads. But there's much more than this little mind that's on its treadmill. So to be open enough to allow the feelings to come into play and the sensitivity of the body. This is the sort of thing that is being opened up, wouldn't

you agree?

JU: Exactly. And that's what Minor was intending to do. And a lot of people didn't understand that, or rejected it. I mean many people practiced it with Minor, found it interesting, and maybe didn't practice it again.

RW: Now the word "presence" hasn't come up. But that's another way of talking about this isn't it? I mean some people might not understand this. Of course I'm present!

JU: Right. I'm in the room with you here.

RW: There's really a spectrum of being present and moments when I am much more present.

JU: Exactly. Oftentimes it's an event. Something happens. I mean, as I age, I've been trying to keep the ability to maintain a sense of presence. When I'm out photographing in Hawaii, this jungle road thing I'm working on, I can do that to a certain extent. I can keep it going. But I discover that, here in the city, it's getting harder for me. Yes. Presence. Your comments about that are interesting. What makes one present? How do you cultivate that in yourself? Coming back to Minor, that's what he did. He cultivated that. He was looking for ways to cultivate that. But he was looking for other things in his life, too. His sexuality. I mean Minor was in the closet, and not in the closet. He couldn't figure out what he was doing.

RW: But his homosexuality is not something he pushed off on other people, I take it.

JU: No. And this is what he couldn't deal with. When we were students in San Francisco, we'd hear about this, but I never saw it.

RW: Is there anything you'd like to say about Minor that hasn't been sufficiently appreciated about him?

JU: He was very generous to people, and I don't mean money. He was generous in terms of his time. What he was struggling with, he would share with you. As time went by and he got to be better known, I've heard from people who didn't know him very well, that he seemed kind of closed and in a world of his own. I believe he began to do that because at some point he had generated so many friendships and had so many students that he had to pull back a little.

RW: One last question. You alluded to being able to stay more present when you're out on that jungle road. When you have your camera with you and the whole process is really going well out there, what's that like?

JU: Well, I'm out there looking for photographs and sometimes I reach a point where what's out there is looking for me. Minor used to talk about how that could happen. And when it does, I know it's happening.

One thing Minor did, and I catch myself doing in Hawaii, is that when I photograph something and have absorbed it—when it's become a mirror of my psyche—then I bow to it.

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