

ARCHAEOLOGY and the shape of time

The Fisher Press, 2011

for Barbara and Melanie



Richard Benson
Paris Rooftops 1980



Edward Ranney
Palpa Valley, Peru 2004

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Photographs by Richard Benson & Edward Ranney

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Introduction

Since its invention in 1839, photography has fought hard to be acknowledged as an art. In an era when painting defined all things pictorial, the initial resistance to photography was likely against the camera’s mechanical nature, which made its pictures feel alien to the more familiar products of the hand. Some early photographers – David Octavius Hill, Julia Margaret Cameron, and later Edward Steichen, among others – tried to overcome that difference by staging their photographs in the studio, or manipulating them in the darkroom to imitate the compositions and styles of the art of their day; but the realism and detail that the lens recorded was so unlike what painters or draftsmen conjured from their imaginations that attempts to make photography conform to the aesthetics of handmade pictures threatened to forfeit the very qualities that made the medium distinct.

At the same time that some early photographers emulated paintings, others were less conscious of the comparison and instead used the camera to capture the kinds of images it was best suited to make. These were mostly the professionals who were photographing the people, places, and events of their time in studios or out in the field. In response to their more practical approach, a school of thought emerged in the early part of the twentieth

century which held that only photographs reproduced as closely as possible to the way that the lens first captured them – unstaged and spontaneously made images, uncropped and minimally altered in the darkroom – could truly be called photographs. This more direct, realist approach came to be called “straight photography.” Despite the rationalistic tone of the term, its implied distinction between less and more manipulative intentions should be understood as an argument about art. Both amateur and professional photographers had been making comparatively straight pictures unselfconsciously from the beginning; the act of defining that approach as a desirable ideal was thus a contrivance of those who hoped to establish photography as a new art. The hard parameters of the straight photographers’ aims set the medium apart from every other kind of artistic practice that had come before.

Today, in a world that threatens daily to drown us in a maelstrom of imagery of every imaginable kind, we understand better that such semantic hair-splitting, between the objectives of one type of picture making and another, sidesteps the truth that every deliberate act of creativity is subject to manipulation. Regardless of how much or how little photographers choose to control their subjects and methods, the resulting pictures remain the products of a mindful authorship. There is, after all, the old-fashioned kind of art in their making – it’s just of a subtler kind than that found in more obviously handmade things like paintings. The straight photographers appreciated the photograph’s power to convince the viewer of some objective truth in what it portrayed. The limiting constraints of their ideal would seem, therefore, to have been calculated to enforce the care of a light hand on the wheel of such a powerful engine of persuasion. They felt that photography, in this purest expression, was an art that did not need to borrow its validity from painting.

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Richard Benson and Edward Ranney came of age creatively at the same historical crossroad in the twentieth century. In the decades leading up to photography’s 150th anniversary, in 1989, the world seemed finally ready, grudgingly, to accept its artistic legitimacy. In the first years of the post-modern era, various younger photographers had begun to feel free to make all manner of theatrically staged, collaged, and otherwise manipulated work that was anything but straight. Benson and Ranney, along with

some of their more celebrated colleagues such as Lee Friedlander and Robert Adams, come from the generation of artists who were summing-up straight-photography's objectives prior to that sea-change – much as the Abstract Expressionists had distilled painting to its essence before Pop Art swept in. In either case, the divide between what came before and what came after is marked on one side by an almost anti-aesthetic ideological purity, and on the other by a free, anything-goes approach, perfectly suited for a burgeoning new marketplace for art.

Another important change that occurred in the postmodern years was the emergence of the Master of Fine Arts degree as the indispensable credential sought by young artists. The photographers who have won fame in the decades since the mid-1970s have mostly been the products of MFA programs at influential colleges and universities like Yale, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the University of New Mexico. Benson and Ranney, both of whom have taught in some of these very programs, come from an earlier generation of artists who did not have graduate degrees, but instead gained their expertise in the practicum of substantial professional careers. The early biographies of both men record twenty-year spans of working experience analogous to the decades-long apprentice and journeyman phases of study and practice required of artists in past ages. Originally, the distinction of Master was not conferred through diplomas awarded to young people at the threshold of their careers, but only after a lifetime of hard and diligent work. By that definition, Benson and Ranney are both genuine masters of their medium.

Richard “Chip” Benson first became involved with photography as a boy when he began taking pictures with a Graflex camera and developing and printing them in the darkroom at his father's stone-carving shop in Newport, Rhode Island. He was also an amateur astronomer and built an observatory in the family's backyard and even taught himself to grind mirrors for his own telescopes. These combined interests later led him, after a brief stint at Brown University, to enlist in the Navy as an optical repair technician (he fixed broken telescopes, binoculars, and gunsights). In 1966, a year or so after completing his military service and marrying his high school sweetheart, Barbara Murray, Benson was hired to work in the darkroom at the Meriden Gravure Printing Company in Connecticut. During

his time there, he worked on solving many complex challenges to translating photographic images into ink on paper, including developing a process of tonal separation for replicating black and white photographs in multiple layers of gray and black ink, which underlies the majority of black and white photographic reproduction to this day.

After Meriden, Benson went on independently to produce film for many fine art photography books, notably for the limited-edition volume *Photographs from the Collection of the Gilman Paper Company*, for which he, and his assistant, Thomas Palmer, not only made all the separations and plates, but also printed the entire edition on a press in the basement of Benson's house. In 1979, he also began teaching at the Yale School of Art. He is famous there for his wide technical and historical knowledge of photography and is the recipient of numerous awards pertaining to it, including two Guggenheim Foundation fellowships and another from the MacArthur Foundation. Benson has also authored, or contributed his pictures to several books on photography. The most recent of these, *The Printed Picture*, is an exhaustive chronicle of the history of printed images that grew out of a series of his lectures at Yale. That book was published by The Museum of Modern Art in New York and was the basis of an exhibition there in 2008. He also coauthored and edited *A Maritime Album* with John Szarkowski in 1997, and took the photographs for Lincoln Kirstein's *Lay This Laurel* (an essay on Augustus Saint Gaudens' Civil War memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the African-American 54th Massachusetts Regiment, published in 1973 by the Eakins Press). Throughout his career, Benson has lived with his wife and four children in New England, taking pictures there and on his frequent trips around the U.S., in Puerto Rico, and abroad. He served as Dean of the Yale School of Art from 1996 to 2006.

Born in Libertyville, Illinois, outside Chicago, Edward Ranney earned his BA at Yale, where he studied English Literature, Art History, Spanish, and Latin American Literature. Upon graduation, he was awarded a Fulbright grant to travel to Peru to explore the relationship between twentieth century Peruvian Literature on the Quechua Indians and their actual living conditions. He began to photograph seriously while doing this work. Finding that he preferred photography to academic studies, Ranney persuaded the

Fulbright office in Lima to change the focus of his project to photography.

In 1966, after returning to the States, Ranney took a job teaching Spanish and photography at the East Hill School in Vermont. While there he met and married a fellow teacher, Melanie Hunsaker, and in 1970 the couple moved together to Santa Fe where they have since lived and raised three daughters. Since moving to New Mexico, Ranney has worked on a series of lengthy, and sometimes overlapping, documentary photographic studies of ancient sites ranging from the desert coast of Peru to the ruins of Pueblo cultures near his home. He is a prolific contributor to book-based projects in which his photographs of archaeological sites form the pictorial narratives around which numerous distinguished authors and scholars have built their texts. His most recent study of this sort is a collaboration with the well-known writer and historian Lucy Lippard in *Down Country: The Tano of the Galisteo Basin, 1250–1782*, published by the Museum of New Mexico Press, in 2010. In the 1990s, Ranney was also commissioned by a Chicago-based environmental group to photograph sites along the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which was designated the nation's first National Heritage Corridor by Congress in 1984. That work was published as *Prairie Passage: The Illinois and Michigan Canal Corridor*, which included essays by Tony Hiss and Emily Harris. His 1982 monograph, *Monuments of the Incas*, showcasing pictures of Inca sites at or near Cusco, Peru, with text by the British historian John Hemming, has recently been re-published by Thames and Hudson. Ranney has taught photography intermittently at various colleges including Princeton University, the University of New Mexico, and the University of Lima. He is a recipient of both National Endowment for the Arts and Guggenheim grants, as well as two Fulbright fellowships for his work in Peru.

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As of this writing in 2011, Ranney and Benson are both in their late sixties and are both still working. Though casually acquainted, they have never known one another well. Their lives and careers nevertheless have many parallels. Both are family men with several children and – in an age when it is increasingly uncommon – life-long marriages. (More curiously, each of them also married a music teacher.) Both were involved with Yale University, one as a student and the other as a professor and dean. Both were friends and protégés of the late John Szarkowski, director of photography at the

Museum of Modern Art from 1962 to 1991, and a piercingly intelligent curator, writer, and supporter of photographic art. Perhaps in part due to an admiration for the many accomplishments of this shared mentor, both Benson and Ranney are – apart from their work with the camera – prolific authors and contributors to a wide range of scholarly photographic books. Most importantly for this exhibition, each has, in his distinct way, made the relationship of time's passage to the physical products of human civilization the chief subject of his work. Ranney does so in his ongoing work at pre-Columbian sites, as well as in his thirty-year documentation of artist Charles Ross's earthworks project *Star Axis* near Las Vegas, New Mexico. Benson seems to be more interested in the impermanence of the passing moment. His pictures illustrate the inexorable procession of technological innovation that renders all our comfortable habits of thought and custom obsolete even as we formulate them. He photographs the physical artifacts of that transition as they still stand, not entirely discarded, within the surrounding and evolving cultural landscape.

Despite their unfamiliarity with one another, these two men share a pictorial lineage that traverses all the phases of straight photography in the twentieth century. That tradition, which began in the early 1900s with Lewis Hine and Alfred Stieglitz, and continued through the Depression-era FSA-commissioned work of photographers such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and others, created the ground from which yet another generation began to move in two distinct directions in the postwar years. One strain – urban, gritty and psychologically provocative – included the New York photographers Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand. The other, more consciously aesthetic and lyrical, looked to Ansel Adams and Edward Weston on the west coast, and Paul Strand and Paul Caponigro in New England. As young men, Benson and Ranney knew and were influenced in some measure by members of this latter, more consciously aesthetic group, yet neither felt comfortable with the *artiste* identity cultivated by some of those older colleagues. In the 1970s and '80s, when both were working through the development of a more personally resonant approach and style, the work of figures who had set an earlier standard for straight photography came back to light through various publications and museum exhibitions. Among these were pioneering professionals like Carleton Watkins and

Timothy O’Sullivan, who had used large-format cameras to record both the landscape and early development of the American West in the mid to late nineteenth century. Ranney and Benson were also personally involved with the legacies of two early twentieth century photographers from other countries – the Peruvian, Martín Chambi and the Frenchman, Eugène Atget. Chambi’s and Ranney’s Peruvian photographs were exhibited together at MoMA in New York in 1979, and Benson reproduced Atget’s pictures for a series of books published in conjunction with a major retrospective of that artist’s work, also at MoMA, in 1981.

Like the predecessors who most influenced them, Benson and Ranney each began their careers working in black and white with large-format view cameras. Ranney is a committed darkroom printer who makes all his pictures in silver gelatin, and has worked in the 5x7-inch format for over forty years. Benson, who now photographs in color with a high-resolution digital SLR, worked in black and white with the 8x10-inch view camera until his late forties when he began experimenting with various color processes. Expert in a wide range of printing methods, he has at one time or another made his pictures in silver, palladium, platinum, photo gravure, offset lithography, and acrylic paint on aluminum plates – an elaborate invention of his own. Most recently he has been printing with pigmented inks plotted by a digital inkjet printer. All these shifts in media were undertaken in search of an escape from the darkroom, and toward a more intuitive, additive method, like painting, that could be executed in the light of day.

Despite their impressive resumes, neither of these two photographers has been much acclaimed for his art. This may be due in part to both men having been so long associated with technical or academic pursuits to which their pictures might reasonably seem ancillary. It is also a reflection on the market-driven, celebrity-obsessed age in which the arts are immersed – not to mention the sheer volume of new photographic imagery that confronts us today. The camera has always been a more readily available tool to a wide population of practitioners than the more traditional handmade arts, especially since the rise of digital imaging in the 1990s. The past decade has seen such an explosive growth in the number of working photographers that encountering their work as a whole today is like standing on the shore in the face of an oncoming tidal wave. There are simply too many pictures of

too many different kinds to take in. Many of these, thanks to the ease of using the new technologies, have at least a superficial appearance of having been expertly produced. In an effort to parse such a terrific profusion of work, large, convention-like “photo reviews” have sprung up, in which legions of newly minted photographers submit their creations for evaluation by an equally prolific army of experts. As with so much of the art of our time, the images competing for attention in that teeming bazaar are often highly sexualized, politically-charged, or brightly colored, all of which are characteristics calculated to grab hold of the most fickle wanderings of an overburdened viewer’s attention.

It is difficult to know how two such modest, thoughtful voices as Benson’s and Ranney’s could hope to be heard in such a cacophony. These are men whose work is woven of penetrating historical knowledge and masterfully executed skills, all accumulated through lifetimes of practice, study, and teaching – not exactly the stuff of commercial art stardom in the postmodern age. Furthermore, the subjects each has chosen to photograph over the years are things of such seeming ordinariness that as viewers we are not sure how to regard them. We have come to expect art to accost us with novelty and provocation. The success or failure of a work seems, too often, to be weighed first against its capacity to inspire a reaction; but the subjects that Benson and Ranney photograph are so close to our daily encounters with the physical world that anyone trained to hunt for a stimulating surprise may well walk past them unmoved. A closer look might elicit an initial shrug of indifference, perhaps masking a deeper feeling of discomfort. Benson’s pictures, in particular, can bring about a reaction similar to what one feels when hearing his or her own voice played back on an audio recording – a feeling of dissatisfaction that the truth does not match some inner, romantic projection, mingled with a grudging acknowledgement that what we hear is probably nearer to reality.

Every age concocts fictions about itself through its art. The great works that last often transcend that kind of cultural vanity and look more soberly at who we are at any given historical moment. Eugène Atget was little known to the world of art until his rediscovery late in the twentieth century. There are many reasons that might explain that neglect; the simplest of these may be that his subjects did not become appealing until their time

had passed. Before that, they were perhaps too close to home – too real and honest to look meaningful. The works of Benson and Ranney may fall in that category as well.

The pictures we have chosen, in collaboration with Benson and Ranney, belong to a developmental period when both had found a personal voice but were still close enough to their influences to echo the lineage from which they descended. All the pictures are black and white and come from the silver gelatin and ink-jet printed originals that Ranney and Benson have made for this exhibition and book.

There is a story of four well-known photographers walking through the woods in New England together. All of them stop to take a picture of the same tree trunk with the result that none of the four photographs look the same. It is surprising that this medium, which we might expect to tend towards uniformity, should allow for such a wide and personal diversity of interpretations. Consequently, an effort has been made to select pictures from either body of work that resonate with one another as coming from shared spheres of interest, but whose intrinsic differences highlight a distinction between two very different sets of eyes. Ranney has a feeling for

the abstract formalism of the artistic period in which he came of age, the 1950s and ‘60s. He composes his pictures in patterns and geometries that stand apart from their subjects while enhancing their more objective narratives. Benson comes from another world – displaced in time, yet modern in his perceptions. He understands his subjects in a literal language like that of the naturalists of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. He is a Darwin, or an Audubon of the lens, meticulously chronicling the genus and species arrayed in the detritus found at the intersection of the industrial and technological ages.

Neither Benson’s nor Ranney’s photographs are provocative; like much of the world we pass through in our daily lives, their imagery will only draw us in if we are, at first, curious to look at it. If we do look, however, that curiosity will be rewarded with layered narratives that gently highlight the limitations of our own knowledge. If, in the process of looking, we learn something we did not previously understand about the worlds depicted—well then, that is art.

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Edward Ranney
Canyon Del Muerto, Arizona 1987

Edward Ranney is best known for his photographs of pre-Columbian architecture. He approaches the subject as we suppose the Inca must have approached the designing of many of their buildings, as a sculptor working in and with natural light to reveal form. By his identification with the early artists he helps us to discover a worldview that was and is reverent and encompassing. He notes, for instance, masonry in which everything fits massively to perfection, crafted to standards in excess of practical need. And he works outward from the structures to find configurations in the natural landscape – of a boulder, say, or a mountain range – that correspond to the built shapes and that must have served as inspiration.

Ed lives in northern New Mexico, about two hundred miles east of Canyon de Chelly (which includes Canyon del Muerto). Many notable photographers have preceded him there, including Timothy O’Sullivan, John Hillers, Edward Curtis, Laura Gilpin, and Ansel Adams. To make a strong new picture at that location is a remarkable achievement.

How did he do it? Probably not by walking the canyon rim with any preconceived notion (if you begin with an idea you’re usually beat before you start). To make a photograph of this quality he must have trusted to good fortune and to his eyes, looking with full attention at the watermarked sandstone, the cottonwoods, and the raking light ... this specific place and moment. Only from within that focus is it likely that he would have been allowed to see more, a landscape unified by what appears to be part of an X, the unnamable.

Perhaps there is also in the picture a suggestion of outstretched arms. I have never asked the photographer if he sees that too (I would not myself answer such a question), but it might be an appropriate reading by any of us. Art is important when nothing less will suffice, a reconciliation.

Robert Adams

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, to one the great letter carvers of the twentieth century, Richard Benson displays in his work a love of made things. An incurable maker of things himself – not only of exquisite photographs printed with processes of his own invention, but also of efficient engines for his beloved Model A Fords and clocks designed to tick in near perpetuity – he knows better than most that perfection in human endeavor is a foolhardy goal. Benson’s pictures memorialize this truth while revealing the well made things of the past to be worthy of our admiration, even as they march towards obsolescence.

Take for instance the subject of the picture opposite. When *Shamrock V* was unveiled in 1930, it was a sight to behold. Built with extravagant materials – a hull of mahogany, a deck of yellow pine, and a centerboard of teak and English elm – it was considered one of the most handsome racing vessels ever made. Its towering mast was also wood, fashioned from nearly fifty pieces of silver spruce. In the America’s Cup competition for which it was commissioned, however, *Shamrock V* was handily beaten by the U.S.-built *Enterprise*, a boat conceived in the shadow of the Wall Street Crash of

1929. Among the *Enterprise’s* advantages was its use of more pragmatic materials borrowed from industry, including a mast made of duralumin, an early aluminum alloy.

The *Shamrock V* has since changed hands several times, its desirability a testament to its extraordinary beauty. In the 1980s, the yacht was brought to a Rhode Island shipyard to be refit and restored. Benson, who also inherited from his father a love of being on the water, saw it there and photographed a section of the boat’s mast (by then upgraded to modern materials) as it temporarily lay prostrate. Here we see a colossus in rare form. Long and sleek, it could be mistaken for a jet wing were it not for its slackened network of supporting lines, which undulate like the waves of the sea. Unlike its counterparts, which stand upright like utility poles in a distant landscape, the focus of Benson’s attention is not shown in its ideal state. But for the photographer’s purpose – to extol the handiwork of others with his own – it could hardly be more magnificent.

Joshua Chuang

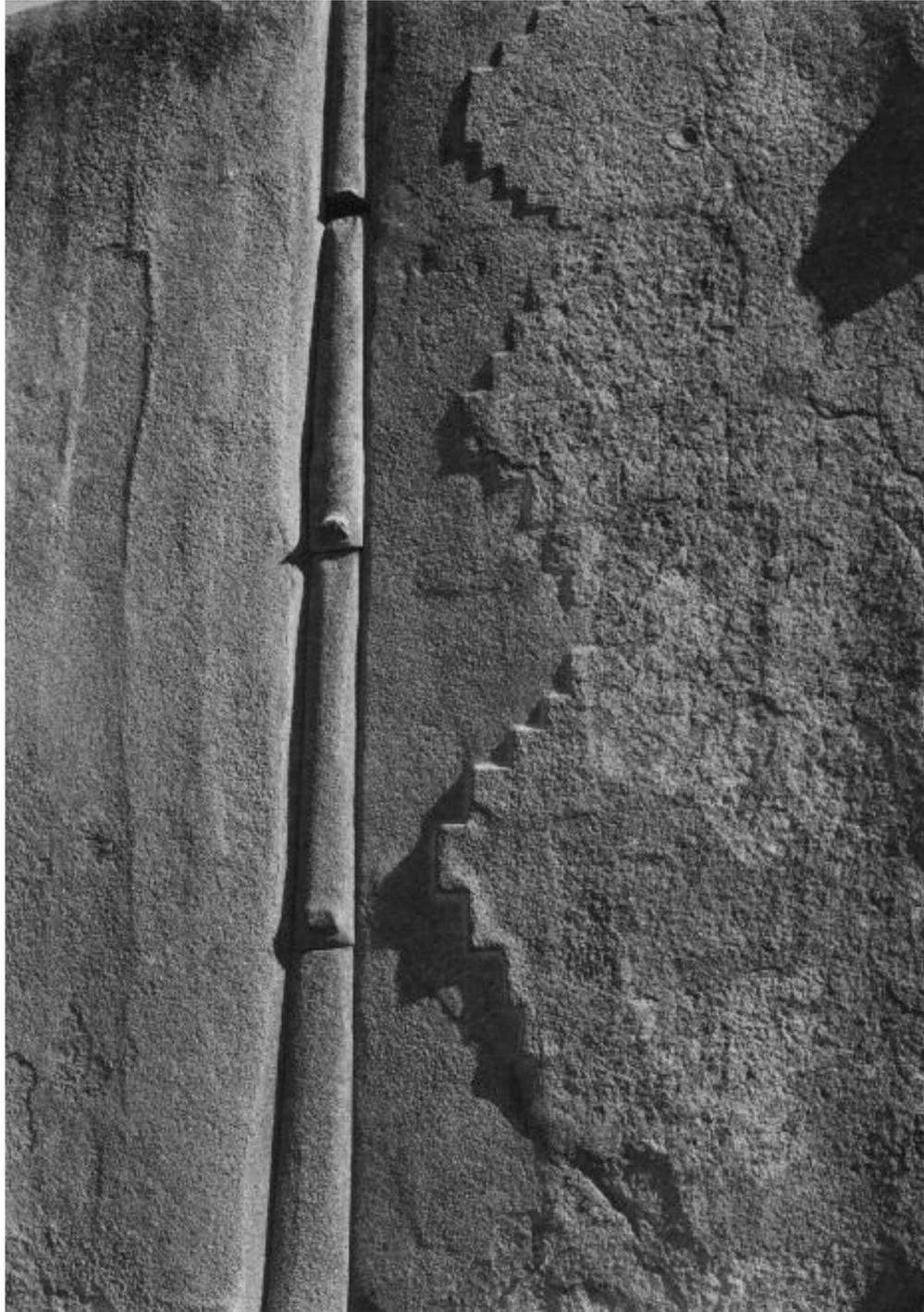


Richard Benson
Mast from Shamrock V, Portsmouth, R.I. 1986

“...the historical question in artists’ lives...is always the question of their relationship
to what has preceded and to what will follow them.”

George Kubler, *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Things*

Plates



1. Ranney
Ollantaytambo,
Peru 1975



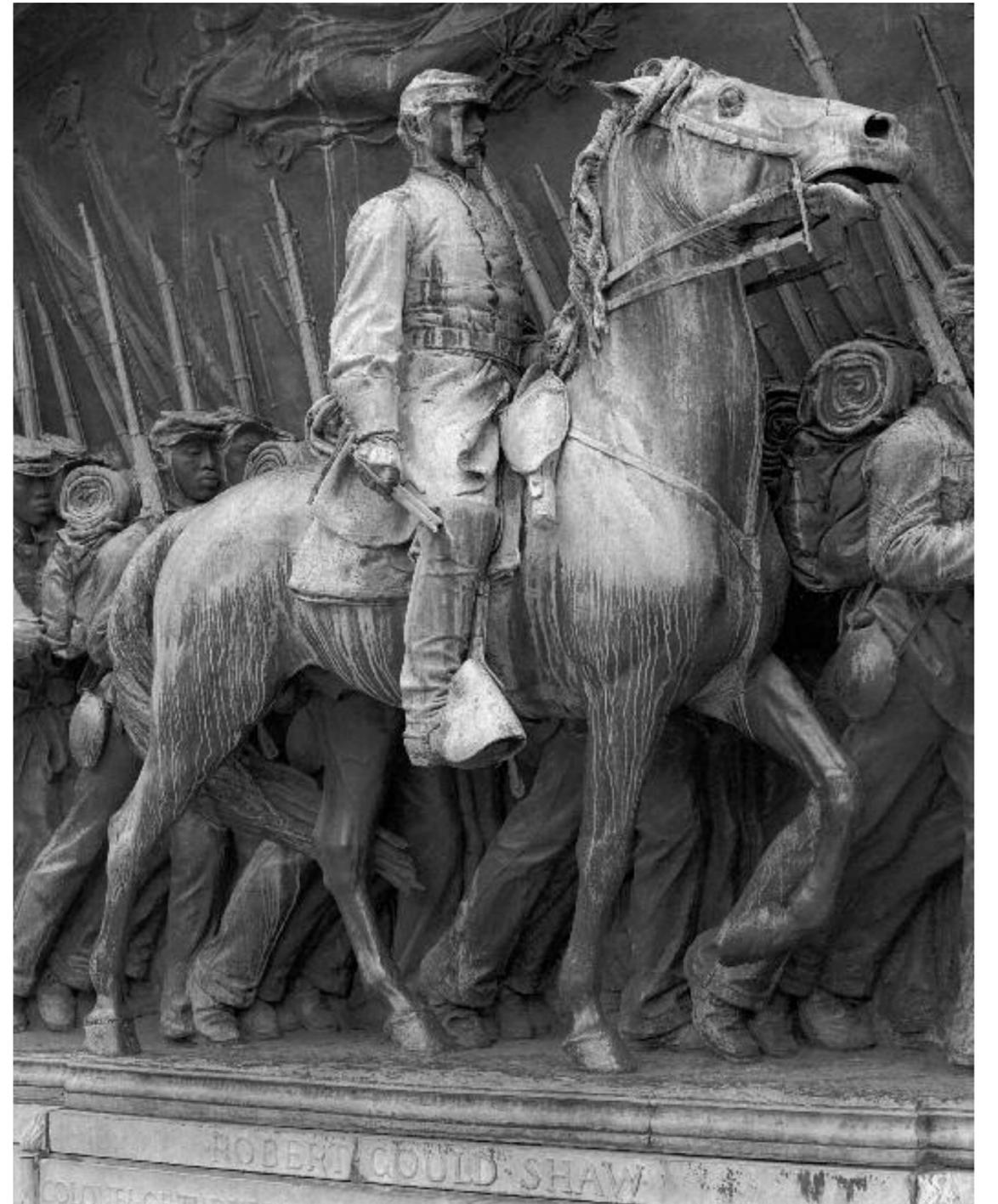
2. Benson
Wrenches,
Puerto Rico 1984

3. Ranney
Stela 21, Tikal,
Guatemala 1970





4. Benson
Shaw Memorial, Boston 1972



5. Benson
Shaw Memorial,
Boston 1972



6. Benson
Waldron Stone
Newport, RI 1976



7. Ranney
Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Morris, Illinois 1992



8. Ranney
Illinois River at Marseilles, Illinois 1996



9. Benson
Caribe Playa Clouds, Puerto Rico 1986



10. Benson
Remains of the River Boat Sprague, Mississippi River 1987



11. Benson
Derektor Shipyard, Middletown, R.I. 1985



12. Benson
Mill Building, Mass. 1983



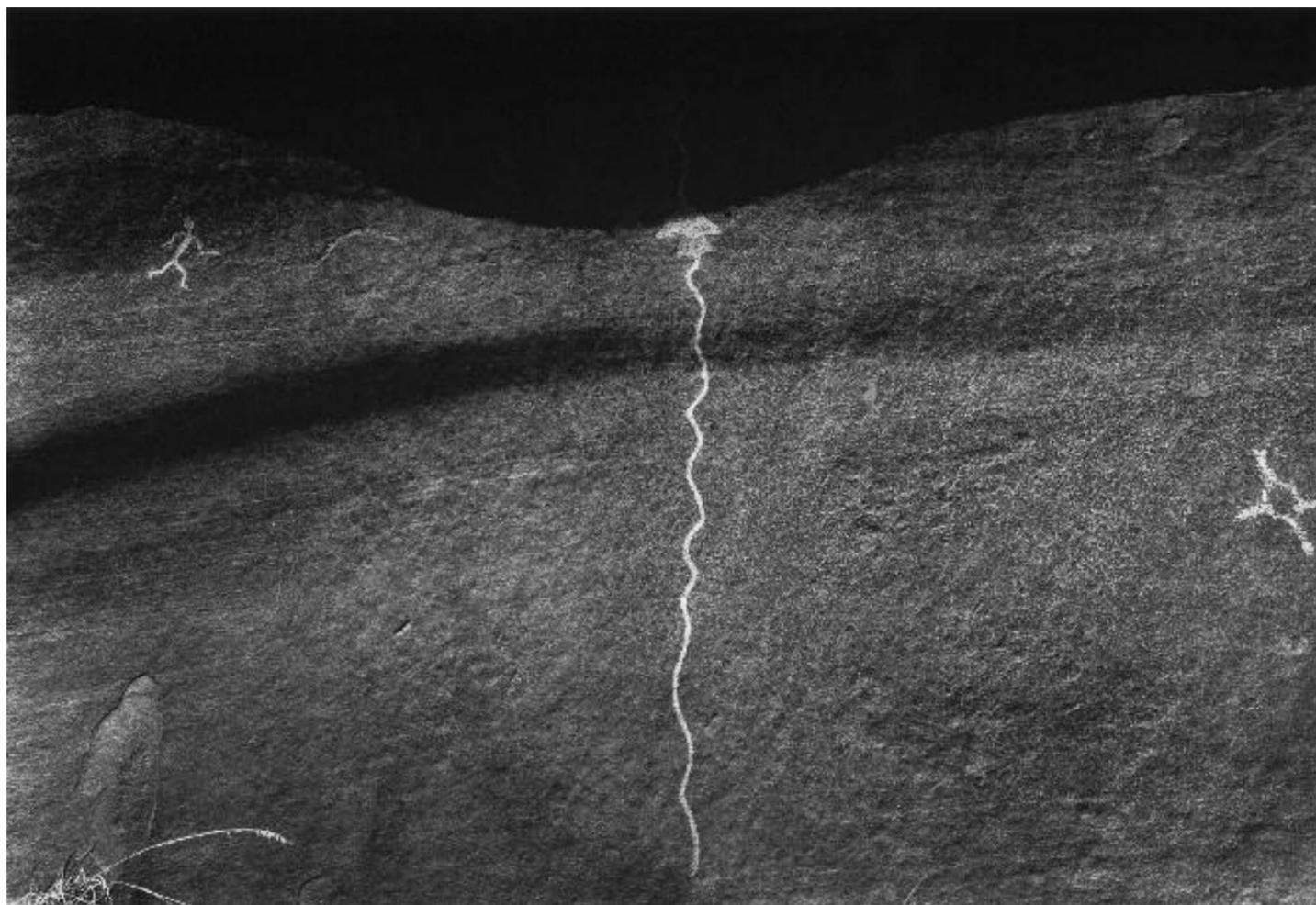
13. Ranney
Huaca Del Oro, Cañete Valley, Peru 2006



14. Ranney
Pueblo Largo, Galisteo Basin, N.M. 1999

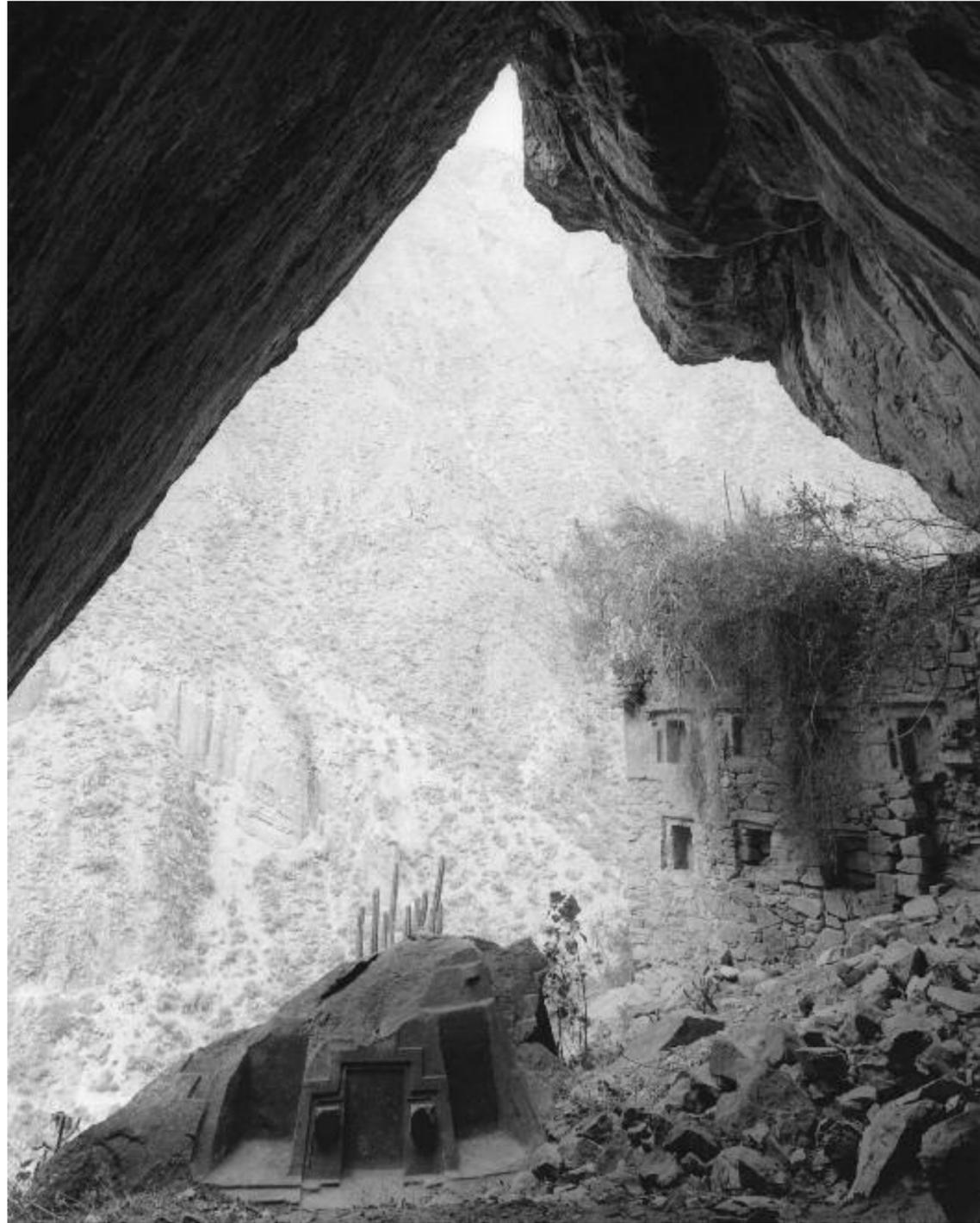


15. Ranney
Star Axis, Las Vegas, N.M. 1/7/1983



16. Ranney

Petroglyph, San Cristobal Pueblo, Galisteo Basin, N.M. 2009

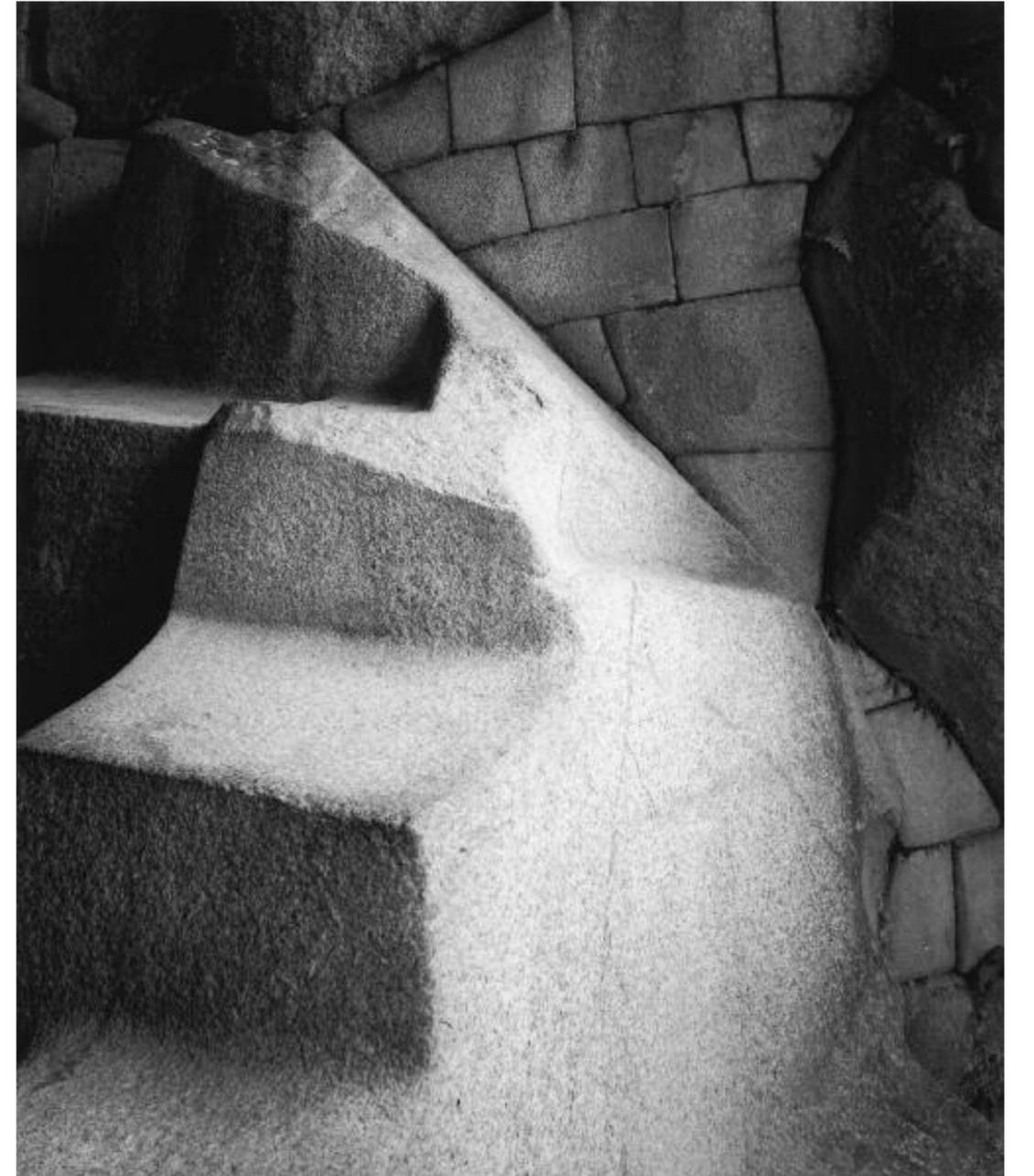


17. Ranney
Choquequilla Cave,
Peru 1975



18. Benson
Chateau Maintenon,
France 1978

19. Ranney
Wall Detail,
Machu Picchu 1971





20. Benson
Meriden,
Conn. 1968



21. Ranney
Canale, Chaquaco,
Santa Fe, N.M. circa 1985



22. Benson
53 Tilden Ave.,
Newport, R.I. 1989

Thanks to my longtime friends and mentors in Santa Fe, Ed Ranney and Eleanor Caponigro, for being so supportive of the Fisher Press in general, and more specifically for their thoughtful advice about the sequencing of the pictures and overall design of this book.

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first appeared in *Photography at Yale*, the 2006 Bulletin of The Yale University Art Gallery.

Finally, I offer this book as a particular acknowledgement of my favorite uncle, Chip Benson, for being a staunch supporter and friend ever since I met him with my grandmother at the Navy Pier in Newport when I was four.

Christopher Benson

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